

A STUDY OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S NOVELS

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## S U M M A R Y

In this thesis Samuel Beckett's novels are examined in chronological order with the intention of tracing the developments in form that his fiction has generated over the years. A chapter is devoted to each of the six major novels: the early English works, Murphy and Watt, the three novels of the French Trilogy, Molloy, Malone meurt and L'innommable, and the later French novel, Comment c'est. The novels are analysed in detail from a structural point of view with particular reference to the self-conscious creative process. The novelist's approach to the problems of creating a fictional world, its characters, its action, its organisation, is studied with the object of revealing the significance of the resulting form.

The conclusion attempts to relate Beckett's modifications of the novel form to his concept of art. We find that art, for Beckett, is not so much a means of expressing his vision as that vision itself; art is a way of exploring reality, of coming to terms with the human condition and probing to the heart of self. Art is an approach to life. While his prose fiction continues to follow the inward road to the core of self, we find that, once the outer world recedes beyond the range of imaginative evocation, the structure of the novel can no longer be achieved.



Pr ..... Proust (Calder and Boyars) 1965 -- with 'Three Dialogues'.  
MPK ..... More Pricks than Kicks (Chatto & Windus) 1934.  
M ..... Murphy (Calder) 1963.  
M [Fr.] .... Murphy (Bordas) 1947.  
W ..... Watt (Calder) 1963.  
W [Fr.] .... Watt (Edns. de Minuit) 1968.  
MC ..... Mercier et Camier (Edns. de Minuit) 1970.  
Mo ..... Molloy (Edns. de Minuit) 1951.  
MM ..... Malone meurt (Edns. de Minuit) 1951.  
I ..... L'innommable (Edns. de Minuit) 1953.  
T ..... The Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable  
(Calder) 1959.  
NTPR ..... Nouvelles et textes pour rien (Edns. de Minuit) 1955.  
CC ..... Comment c'est (Edns. de Minuit) 1961.  
HII ..... How It Is (Calder) 1964.  
TM ..... Têtes-mortes (Edns. de Minuit) 1967 -- includes  
Imagination morte imaginez, Assez and Bing.  
L ..... Lessness (Calder & Boyars) 1970.  
G ..... En attendant Godot (Edns. de Minuit) 1952.  
FP ..... Fin de partie (Edns. de Minuit) 1957.

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CHAPTER I

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

Few writers alive today can have been the subject of as much critical investigation as Samuel Beckett. Whatever can be said about his plays, there is little doubt that his prose fiction is difficult of access -- indeed his later work must lose enormously without some knowledge of the earlier fiction, so much does its effect depend on thematic continuity and understanding of the author's particular concept of reality. The accumulated critical studies provide not only, or merely, erudite exegesis but also sensitive insights into this troublesome and complex work. The present thesis does not in any way seek to contradict the findings of other investigators, or to suggest alternative interpretations; its main aim is to correct an imbalance. Beckett's multi-faceted writing offers so many points of interest to the critic -- its ontology, humour, use of language, psychology, literary and philosophical background, epistemology and idiosyncratic vision -- that the manner in which it fulfils its primary function as art, defined by René Wellek and Austin Warren as 'fidelity to its own nature',<sup>1</sup> tends to get overlooked.

<sup>1</sup> Theory of Literature (1949: 3rd Edn. 1963), p.37.

This thesis therefore sets out to look at the novels as novels, as aesthetic structures whose main purpose is to give aesthetic pleasure to the reader. It is not necessary to agree with Susan Sontag that this is the sole use of criticism to accept that such an approach to Beckett's art is worth making: 'to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means'.<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps a mistake to assume that analysis of the materials of which a work of art is constituted can be equated with analysis of the art product itself.

The novels have been chosen as the subject for this study for several reasons. Firstly, they are probably less well known than the plays, requiring more labour on the part of the reader and more sustained concentration. While the impact of the plays, true to their nature as drama, is immediate, the novel's effect is cumulative, their density encourages rereading and turning over in the mind so that new meanings and parallels and patterns are constantly coming to light; consequently they repay the extra attention given them with much added pleasure. Then, by virtue of its size alone, the novel gives greater scope than the play or poem for working out all the complexities of Beckett's artistic vision of life, which is also, as we shall see, a concept of art. The novel's extension in space and time permits it to support a whole world, not just a fragment. Beckett's

<sup>1</sup> Against Interpretation (1967), p.14.



is a sophisticated vision and the longer prose fictions can convey the full range of its subtleties better than the theatre, whose effect is necessarily simpler for being instantaneous. If his novels do not reproduce an historical era, as War and Peace does, or a cross-section of teeming city life, as Ulysses, they do extend into the abstract, extra-spatio-temporal dimension of eternity and also probe the depths of the layer upon layer of inner self hiding the essence of Being. The plays cannot avoid statement of a kind, since they set a reality of delineated forms on the stage. For Beckett, art explores the reality beneath the surfaces; contemplation and open interrogation are the essential features of the artistic experience; the novels are his best medium for exploration of the inner world, because words, by their very nature, have no direct bearing on reality -- paradoxically therefore they are best suited to suggest the void of Being, while incapable of formulating it. Beckett is aware of this paradox and it is probably at the root of his choice of words as his principal artistic medium:

chaque fois qu'on veut leur faire exprimer autre chose que des mots, ils s'alignent de façon à s'annuler mutuellement.<sup>1</sup>  
C'est, sans doute, ce qui donne à la vie tout son charme.

Beckett considers himself to be primarily a novelist, very probably because of his clear 'preference for the non-conceptual',<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'La peinture des Van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon', Les Cahiers d'Art, XX-XXI (1945-46), 352.

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence E. Harvey, Samuel Beckett. Poet and Critic (Princeton, N.J. 1970), p.343 -- hereafter cited as Harvey. Mr. Harvey's book, and in particular his section on Beckett's aesthetics, has provided much useful, unpublished material, as well as helpful discussion for an understanding of this difficult art.

which, as Lawrence E. Harvey demonstrates, is evident from his earliest work. Accordingly it is to the novels that one naturally turns in order to come to grips with his art in all its intricacies.

The final reason for choosing to work on the novels stems directly from the range of work already done. The poems are mostly early work and have, in any event, been examined in detail in the study, just mentioned, by Harvey. The plays, which represent a much larger proportion of Beckett's work, have been considered by many critics in the context of the Theatre of the Absurd, and their theatricality, conscious exploitation of which is a distinctive feature of Absurd drama, has been given a good deal of attention. In addition, Alec Reid's perceptive study is devoted to an analysis of how they work as plays and the nature of the dramatic experience they produce in their audience.<sup>1</sup> The novels, on the other hand, and not without reason, have tended to arouse critical interest on the levels of thought and symbolism rather than aesthetic experience. This is not so much because their literary quality is unappreciated as that the materials of which they are constituted are in themselves highly complex and the total literary experience is enriched by their further elucidation. Critics have accordingly tended to concentrate on exegesis rather than analysis, and emphasis has been laid on

<sup>1</sup> All I Can Manage, More Than I Could: An Approach to the Plays of Samuel Beckett (Dublin 1968) -- hereafter cited as Reid.

the direction in which Beckett's thought has developed rather than the forms it has given rise to in his fiction. If Beckett himself protested to Gabriel d'Aubarède: 'Il n'y a pas de clé, il n'y a pas de problème. Si le sujet de mes romans pouvait s'exprimer en termes philosophiques, je n'aurais pas eu de raison de les écrire',<sup>1</sup> this is not to say that their philosophical themes are unimportant; after all philosophy, both from the point of view of the philosophical systems to which Beckett's thought relates (Cartesianism, Existentialism etc.) and of that thought itself as it is woven into the texts, is an essential material in his work and as such needs exposition. The interest of the influence of Dante or Descartes is not at all extrinsic to consideration of his art as a writer, since, as Walter Strauss shows for Dante<sup>2</sup> or Hugh Kenner for Descartes,<sup>3</sup> they mark both atmosphere and architecture profoundly. Vivian Mercier, followed by Kenner, opens up a whole new dimension through examining Beckett's mathematical symbolism.<sup>4</sup> And, as Richard N. Coe's study of his thought makes clear,<sup>5</sup> the writer's fictional world takes its dimensions from his mental preoccupations -- the void

<sup>1</sup> 'En attendant Beckett', Nouvelles Littéraires, 16 fév. 1961, p.7.

<sup>2</sup> 'Dante's Belacqua and Beckett's Tramps', CL, XI, 3 (Summer 1959)

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study (1962).

<sup>4</sup> 'The Mathematical Limit', The Nation, CLXXXVIII (14 Feb. 1959).

<sup>5</sup> Beckett (1964) -- hereafter cited as Coe.



of ultimate reality, the conflict between time and eternity, the ever-receding self, the satisfactory logic of the abstract mathematical domain, the reflexiveness of language. Beckett was anxious to warn his readers, when he went back to Dante, Bruno and Vico to help throw light on the structure of Joyce's Finnegans Wake, that 'The danger is in the neatness of identifications', and he objected to Vico's insistence on 'complete identification between the philosophical abstraction and the empirical illustration, thereby annulling the absolutism of each conception'.<sup>1</sup> While the danger exists equally in elucidations of his own work, study of the literary and philosophical background is as fruitful in his case as his study of Finnegans Wake proved it to be in Joyce's. A direct approach to Beckett's novels is all the richer an experience for being made in the light of clarification of the materials of which they are composed.

This direct approach to the novels, does, however, require to be made. The novel is the entity and the thought found in it is simply a component, if a fascinating one; as the narrator in Murphy says of his hero's "closed-system" mind: 'Of infinitely more interest than how this came to be so was the manner in which it might be exploited' (M,77), so can be said of the philosophical sub-structure of the novels. The themes of fiction combine to form a pattern as well as a vision of life. The two major studies of Beckett's novels emphasise content rather than form:

<sup>1</sup> 'Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce', Our Exagmination round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress (Paris 1929) p.3.



John Fletcher traces the evolution of the hero (as well as examining Beckett's style in French and English),<sup>1</sup> and Eugene Webb sees the novels as a 'comprehensive portrait of man in his relationship to the universe',<sup>2</sup> both concentrating on the development of themes and the intellectual background. What we wish to do here is not to work back from the novels to our own world in which by one means or another, action or reaction, their inspiration has its origin, but to work forward from the creative mind to the creations, the works of art, the verbal world which is uniquely Beckett's. The first point that must be made about Beckett's fictional world is that it is protean and undefinable. In the unpublished novel 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women' (to which Lawrence Harvey had access), written about 1932, the hero, Belacqua, says: 'The reality of the individual ... is an incoherent reality and must be expressed incoherently',<sup>3</sup> and Beckett has clearly never changed this opinion. Beckettian man cannot tell what he sees, he can only say how he sees at any given moment; it follows that the significance of the author's artistic structures lies more in how they are formed than in what they are formed of. The self-conscious dimension

<sup>1</sup> The Novels of Samuel Beckett (1964) -- hereafter cited as Fletcher, Novels.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett: A Study of His Novels (1970), p.vii -- hereafter cited as Webb.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey, p.342.

of the novels is accordingly of fundamental importance, whether it be the structural irony and intrusive authors of Murphy and Watt, or the author-heroes of the later novels, since it keeps the reader aware of the creative process. In 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women' the self-conscious narrator comments on his world, referring to 'the reluctance of our refractory constituents to bind together and give us a synthesis', and offers as explanation that 'Their movement is based on a principle of repulsion, their property not to combine but, like heavenly bodies, to scatter and stampede ... And not only to shrink from all that is not they, from all that is without and in its turn shrinks from them, but also to strain away from themselves. They are no good from the builder's point of view, firstly because they will not suffer their systems to be absorbed in the cluster of a greater system, and then, and chiefly, because they themselves tend to disappear as systems'.<sup>1</sup> Beckett's verbal world therefore shuns logical coherence. What holds it together on the level of causation and logic is its revealed relation to the creative consciousness in which it originates. Awareness of the way of seeing or creative process which generates it is thus of prime importance for acceptance on its own terms.

The novels are not objective exposures of an organism (that word so often associated with the novel), but together they form a series of subjective explorations of an ultimately inaccessible

<sup>1</sup> Harvey, pp.340-341.

reality. Where we speak of artistic vision, undoubtedly the metaphor Beckett would use is that of the journey. He said to Alec Reid that 'when he sets out to write a novel, he is entering a jungle'.<sup>1</sup> When he wrote to Alan Schneider about the composition of Fin de partie, he made the journey metaphor for artistic activity even clearer: 'I'm in a ditch somewhere near the last stretch and would like to crawl up on it'<sup>2</sup> -- and the relevance of Beckett's imagery to understanding of the symbolic level of the painful, crawling journeys of the later author-heroes in the novels is evident. The journey or quest forms the backbone of the novels. All aspects tend to be presented from the point of view of a question, not an answer, of an open-ended investigation, not a description -- the setting, the hero, the action, the themes. Of the play En attendant Godot Beckett said that it 'is striving all the time to avoid definition',<sup>3</sup> and the same may clearly be said of the novels; their world continuously rejects organisation and delineation. It is explored from within and its boundaries are never reached -- just as Molloy never crosses the frontiers of his "region". Alec Reid speaks of Beckett's describing himself as 'a man whose world has no outside; "It is impossible for me to talk about my writing

<sup>1</sup> Reid, p.20.

<sup>2</sup> 'Beckett's Letters on Endgame', The Village Voice, March 19, 1958, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> Reid, p.65.

because I am constantly working in the dark," he once explained, "it would be like an insect leaving his cocoon. I can only estimate my work from within."<sup>1</sup> And, being work in which the artistic need for form acts as a centrifugal force, seeking to shape from within rather than contain from without, it is best examined from within if we are to grasp the initial unity of its "refractory constituents", and the "principle of repulsion" on which their movement is based, of which Beckett spoke in 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women'.

In order to see how the artist comes to terms with the clash between his need for form and the drive of the constituents of his fictional world towards disintegration, it has been necessary to examine how this world comes into being without ever assuming a definitive outline. The reality of its physical setting and its visible characters, and the progress of its action and chronology are systematically undermined, while a new reality is intimated beneath the surfaces but never stated. The resultant chaos is gathered together through the interrelation of all the elements: themes reflect the structure of the novels' world, commenting on its setting, its protagonists, its action and its medium; contrasts and parallels at all levels give aesthetic form without binding the materials into a causally functioning organism. Patterns are built up through interweaving images and phrases to replace -- at least in the later novels -- temporal

<sup>1</sup> Reid, p.53.



continuity, and a constant cross-referencing of imagery and ideas counteracts the dissolutive tendency of non-logical vision. Accordingly the novels have been analysed from a structural point of view with particular reference to the self-conscious creative process, since it is the added dimension of self-awareness which gives the structuring process its significance. Ultimately their structure reflects man's consciousness organising the chaos of phenomena, while their self-consciousness insists upon the arbitrariness of such organisation. If, then, we wish to establish what these novels mean, an examination of structure demonstrates that it is not so foolish as it sounds to conclude that they mean what they are.

CHAPTER II

M U R P H Y

## I. Introduction

Samuel Beckett's first full-length, published novel, Murphy, appeared in 1938 and received little public attention. Prior to that he had produced a limited quantity of short stories, poetry, literary criticism and reviews, and had experimented with a novel, 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women', which remains unpublished but provided the bulk of the material for the ten short stories published in 1934 under the title of More Pricks than Kicks. As their hero's literary name, Belacqua Shuah,<sup>1</sup> suggests, these early stories, while often extremely funny, are somewhat immature: literary influences are unabsorbed and style is frequently a matter of virtuosity and not, as Beckett clearly feels it should be in his essay on Proust, 'more a question of vision than of technique' (Pr.87-88). In Murphy, however, the literary references are more discreet, and style is better controlled and more closely related to vision. The ironic narrator of More Pricks than Kicks indicated that Belacqua's anxiety to explain himself was 'alone sufficient to give him away as inept ape of his own shadow', and added that 'He was an impossible person ... I gave him up in the end because he was not serious' (MPK,46). Murphy might

<sup>1</sup> See Fletcher, Novels, pp.16-17; Belacqua is the slothful Florentine of the fourth canto of Dante's Purgatorio; Shuah is probably from Genesis, being the grandfather of Onan.

thus be called Beckett's first serious hero. Although the narrator willingly expounds upon his new hero's view of life, Murphy himself never tries to explain it, even if his weakness for Celia betrays him momentarily into defending it: 'An atheist chipping the deity was not more senseless than Murphy defending his courses of inaction, as he did not require to be told' (M, 30). The novel of which he is hero builds its world around his dualist vision and he simply lives out its implications to their logical conclusion.

All Beckett's novels reflect a post-Cartesian vision of life. The world he projects suffers from a basic dichotomy between mind and matter and in it he portrays man's struggle to come to grips with reality. For Murphy, unlike the later heroes, the outer world is still real; his dualistic outlook, as the narrator explains, 'did not involve him in the idealist tar. There was the mental fact and there was the physical fact, equally real if not equally pleasant' (M, 76). As Samuel I. Mintz points out, Cartesianism, and particularly the Occasionalist doctrine of Geulincx, is used by Beckett much as Joyce used Vico: 'to give his novel structure, action and meaning and not merely to exercise his own intellectual ingenuity'.<sup>1</sup> Murphy's is post-Cartesian vision at its most naive. The Occasionalist philosophers are taken at their face value; the material world

<sup>1</sup> 'Beckett's Murphy: A "Cartesian" Novel', Perspective, XI (Autumn 1959), 156.

becomes a contingent mechanism over which man has no control and in which he can exercise no freedom, while the mind is man's glory -- the mental world is the realm in which he belongs and wherein he possesses a limitless freedom. Murphy therefore resolutely chooses the latter and attempts to live isolated from phenomena. As Samuel Mintz indicates, however, one fundamental premise of the philosophers is absent in Murphy's world: the existence of God as the ultimate source of meaning and value and as a guarantee of co-ordination between thought and extension.<sup>1</sup> This absence of an absolute deprives the novel of any inherent logic, so that the directing of developments becomes an arbitrary imposition of the author instead of an organised necessity arising from the make-up of characters and situation. The dualism of its world is bound to produce an ironic structure since man as a conscious being can never come to terms with the surrounding universe, the Sartrean "pour-soi" can never unite with the "en-soi", and literature as a product of the mind can never envelop phenomena. Hugh Kenner holds that 'Murphy is not a typical Beckett book ... and in no obvious way does the more celebrated later work derive from it'.<sup>2</sup> But Murphy starts the retreat into the self which all the later works follow.<sup>3</sup> He rejects social values and outer reality as his successors will. Only in his optimism, unfounded as the novel demonstrates, does he really differ from them. Since in Murphy life is most

<sup>1</sup> 'Beckett's Murphy: A "Cartesian" Novel', 157-160.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study, p.52.

<sup>3</sup> Beckett said to Colin Duckworth: 'If you want to find the origins of En attendant Godot, look at Murphy' ('The Making of Godot', Theatre Research VII, 3 :1966, p.123).



naïvely approached, the irony is most light-hearted, but the germs of future bitterness and pervasive doubt are already apparent.

This first novel is the perfect refutation of the charge against Beckett that he is obscure for obscurity's sake. Where familiar tools are available for the handling of his material, he makes use of them, as is clearly the case here. The essential elements of the traditional concept of what a novel should be, are clearly recognisable: a story with beginning, middle and end, carefully planned causality, a hero of sorts, even a heroine, and distinguishable secondary characters, and a coherent time sequence. John Fletcher remarks that 'Murphy ... is so carefully and intricately constructed as by its very complexity to constitute a defiant parody of the traditional novel'.<sup>1</sup> The splendid nineteenth-century novel, with its worldly values and masterly vision, is an unsuitable vehicle for Beckett's experience of reality which abhors systems. In 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women' he takes Balzac and Jane Austen to task for their synthesised worlds: 'in reality, this is so little the story, this nervous recoil into composure ... To read Balzac is to receive the impression of a chloroformed world'.<sup>2</sup> Thus Murphy develops as a parody of the traditional novel, superficially meticulously correct but fundamentally self-destructive.

<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett's Art (1967), pp.86-87 (referred to henceforward as Fletcher, Art).

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Harvey, p.341.

Every possible device is used to detract from its merit as a conventional work: the story is complicated but hardly exciting, the plot is anticlimactic, the characters are grotesque, and the narrative technique constantly aims at upsetting the suspension of disbelief. Human action and significance within space and time, the sine qua non of the traditional novel, become an absurd mockery when subjected to Beckett's particular post-Cartesian vision which turns disparagingly from the visible universe. Where the traditional writer presents his novel as a meaningful revelation of life, Beckett refuses his any such authoritative position -- as, indeed, does Kafka. The nineteenth-century novels revealed an underlying pattern of living, while Beckett suggests that the pattern is a capricious imposition on the part of the novelist.

## II. Fictional World

The world of phenomena looms large in Murphy for the simple reason that the story basically deals with a vain struggle to obliterate it from a conscious mind. In this sense the conventional novel, with its framework of a familiar world, is an acceptable vehicle. However, in the sense that it places man in the centre of that world and portrays him acting within society according to an accepted set of values pertaining to a coherent social order, it is obviously unacceptable, since for Murphy the material world is irrelevant and significant action within it is not only undesirable but frankly impossible. His is the split world of a Geulincx minus a God to draw it together;

the reality of self is found in the mind and the body is mere distraction, a phenomenon among contingent phenomena. This is in sharp contrast to the world of a Balsac, where all matter functions in human terms. The inconsistencies of such an interpretation of reality are quite obvious to Murphy: 'Everything that happened became with Celia yet another reason for Murphy's finding work ... [persuading him] that his engagement at even a small salary could not fail to annihilate, for a time at least, the visible universe for his beloved' (M,48). Even Celia intuitively rejects the social concept of reality, looking at the Caledonian market, 'where the frenzied justification of life as an end to means threw light on Murphy's prediction, that livelihood would destroy ... his life's goods ... She could not go where livings were being made without feeling that they were being made away' (M,49). Indeed it is the world of facts (and fancies, if we consider the limitations set on the hero's freedom by his love of Celia -- or ginger biscuits) which blocks Murphy's retreat into the mental realm, since 'his mind functioned not as an instrument but as a place, from whose unique delights precisely those current facts withheld him' (M,123). Life in Murphy's material world is irrelevant, and objects are meaningless. Only the rockingchair in which we meet Murphy and he meets his end is given a meaningful function; but even this is ironic in that it serves as a way of escape into the inner world -- the rocking matters more than the chair.

### III. Characters

As a traditional hero Murphy is pathetic; his whole being strains towards inaction and his sympathy is directed towards the occupants of the mental asylum, with their inverted consciousness. Nor does he achieve the status of the later Beckettian heroes; Raymond Federman points out that, since he still caters for bodily needs, he cannot subsist 'in the vacuum of fiction'.<sup>1</sup> Certainly he is closer to the inner world than was Belacqua ('an indolent bourgeois poltroon, very talented up to a point, but not fitted for private life in the best and brightest sense', MPK, 233), since he does occasionally manage, with the help of his chair, to come alive in his mind. However, the narrator does not permit us to identify too closely with his dubious hero, or to take his philosophy over-seriously. He mocks his ingenuousness: 'The issue therefore, as lovingly simplified and perverted by Murphy, lay between nothing less fundamental than the big world and the little world' (M, 123), and his blind presumption: 'even if the patients did sometimes feel as lousy as they looked, still no aspersion was necessarily cast on the little world where Murphy presupposed them ... to be having a glorious time' (M, 124). There is clearly a deal of caricature in the hero's depiction -- his dress, his obsessions, his idiosyncrasies. The role of outcast assigned to the later heroes is already hinted at for this most social of the novels' protagonists. And Beckett clearly wanted to heighten this

<sup>1</sup> Journey to Chaos: Samuel Beckett's Early Fiction (Berkeley & Los Angeles 1965), p. 86 (referred to henceforward as Federman).



impression when he added a comic rhythm to the subsequent French translation of the scene of the mocking chandlers:

"'E ain't smart," said the chandler, "not by a long chork 'e ain't."

"Nor 'e ain't a boy," said the chandler's semi-private convenience, "not to my mind 'e ain't."

"'E don't look rightly human to me," said the chandlers' eldest waste product, "not rightly." (M,56)

-- Ça, intelligent ? dit le marchand de couleurs.  
Merde alors.

-- Ça, un garçon ? dit son lieu d'aisance demi-privé. Mince alors.

-- Ça, un homme ? dit leur produit de rebut aîné.  
Un vrai homme comme papa ? Zut alors. (M [Fr.] 61).

Nonetheless we are not allowed to write him off as a purely comic character. Ludovic Janvier reminds us that Murphy has two faces: the down-and-out presented to the reader and the much sought-after man in the eyes of his followers.<sup>1</sup> If his attempt to withdraw from the world of phenomena seems naïve, the vanity and chaos of that 'colossal fiasco' (M,123), as it is presented in the book, makes his rejection of it understandable. He is, however, too ambiguous and ineffectual a character to bear the whole weight of plot structure which is placed upon him; indeed much of the humour derives from the contrast between the enormity of the burden of plot and the debility of the bearer: "'Our medians," said Wylie, "... meet in Murphy." ... "In the outer light," said Miss Counihan' (M,146).

<sup>1</sup> Pour Samuel Beckett (Paris 1966), p.26 (referred to henceforward as Janvier).

The minor characters in the novel are pure burlesque. Professor Coe attributes the book's comic value to Beckett's 'burying the metaphysical sub-structure ... deep beneath its quite literal application,' adding that 'since the metaphysics are baroque, the application is grotesque';<sup>1</sup> and Neary and company, with their parodic philosophical discussions and frantic scuttling hither and thither, prove his point. Machine-like representatives of the material world, they are caricatures rather than characters, puppets in the hands of their creator with no life of their own: 'All the puppets in this book whinge sooner or later, except Murphy, who is not a puppet' (M, 86). By using them to complicate and give body to the story by their machinations, Beckett implies that the world of desires and ambitions which they represent is an absurdity. These grotesques are the only possible inhabitants of the conventional novel's world as conceived in Beckett's sceptical mind.

Celia, on first consideration, seems strangely out of place among this collection of weird and comic creatures. She is not only exceptional in Murphy, there is no other woman like her in all Beckett's work. Her warmth and humanity never reappear in a Beckettian character, although pale reflections of her qualities are seen in Mrs. Rooney in All That Fall, or Winnie in Happy Days, as through a distorting mirror. Coupled with the boating memory in Krapp's Last Tape, the treatment of Celia

<sup>1</sup> Coe, p.32.

represents one of the few occasions when sexual love is presented as desirable and rewarding, despite the metaphysical problems it causes. Celia's love for Murphy is never belittled and the genuineness of her predicament, while lightly treated in keeping with the general tone, is never questioned. She is the one person with whom the reader tends to identify, being the subject of some of the most moving passages in the novel. We are intensely aware of her pain when Murphy first leaves her, and when she learns from Miss Carridge that the break is final, both moments crystallising in the image of hands: 'clutching the spike of railing, the fingers loosening and tightening' (M,100), 'the hand on the banister, gripping, then sliding a little, gripping again, then sliding a little more' (M,108).<sup>1</sup> Through her we sense the rare moments of pathos: a singing child who does not answer her lonely good night (M,106), the child singing no more because his kite is broken (M,191). We are even thrust directly inside her head, the single occasion when such intimacy with any of the characters is permitted, and forced to follow from within the self-protective, retrogressive reaching of her mind into the past, as she shuts her thoughts away from contemplation of the loss

<sup>1</sup> Similarly Mme. Louis's life, in Malone Meurt, is summed up in her convulsed hands: 'qui se croisent, gesticulent, puis reprennent tristement le travail' (MM,51). We have here evidence of Beckett's interest in mime, of which he spoke to Charles Marowitz, as 'the stratum of movement which underlies the written word', and his 'sense of form in movement. The kind of form one finds in music, for instance, where themes keep recurring' -- 'Paris Log', Encore, IX, 2 (March/April 1962), 44.

of her loved one:

"We shall be here to receive him," said Miss Counihan.

Her cot had a high rail all the way round. Mr. Willoughby Kelly came ... knelt, grasped the bars and looked at her through them.... Sometimes he sang.

"Neary and I upstairs," said Wylie (M,159-60).

Celia it is who intimates that there is more to Murphy than his role of mock-hero would allow. It is through its effect on Celia that the reader reaches beyond the comic circumstances of his quandary to the real philosophical problems underlying it. She acts as his interpreter: 'I was a piece out of him that he could not go on without ... He had to leave me to be what he was before he met me ... I was the last exile' (M,159).

On the other hand, Celia is by no means a pure example of the realistic heroine. Her very name has symbolic overtones, with its associations with Heaven, suggesting the Virgin Mary ("Regina Coeli"), and the heavenly system by which Murphy's horoscope, his "Thema Coeli", is cast. And Mr. Kelly invites us to dwell on its punning possibilities: 'Celia, s'il y a, throbbing behind his eyes' (M,82). For Eugene Webb, who reads Murphy as a parody of Dante's Purgatorio, 'Celia is the Beatrice of the book'; for Samuel Mintz she is 'the very type of Mary Magdalene -- prostitute into disciple'.<sup>1</sup> Nor is she completely insulated against irony: as Ruby Cohn mentioned,<sup>2</sup> her prostitution has marked her: 'she could not disguise her gait' (M,49), and her introduction, like a

<sup>1</sup> Webb, p.45; 'Beckett's Murphy: A "Cartesian Novel", p.162. Celia is also the name of Bonaventure Des Périers' Cymbalum Mundi heroine, who loves a god. The Third Dialogue, in which she figures, gives a singularly apt message from Minerve to poets: 'qu'ilz ne s'amusent point tant à la vaine parole de mensonge, qu'ilz ne prennent garde à l'utile silence de vérité' (Cymbalum Mundi, ed. Peter Nurse, Manchester, 1957, p.26).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut, New Brunswick, 1962.



prospective beauty queen, adds a comic element to her make-up which prevents her from seeming totally impossible in the cartoon-strip realm of Neary and Miss Carridge.<sup>1</sup> Like the mental asylum and the rockingchair, Celia represents a kind of half-way house, belonging in neither the puppet world of Neary nor the irrational world of Murphy, yet providing a point of contact with both. And love too is an inexplicable quantity both in Miss Counihan's closed system of appetites and in Murphy's yearning for ataraxy; but this hero is still a sufficiently social animal to admit the possibility of its existence, where the harsh alienation of the later protagonists of Beckett's novels will make it an absurd conception, fit only for ridicule. William York Tindall sets Celia apart because 'she alone finds and knows herself: "I am a prostitute."' (M,158);<sup>2</sup> 'I am what I do' (M,30), she tells Murphy -- the attitude of the traditional heroine perhaps, and Murphy scorns this understanding of selfhood: 'If I had to work out what you are from what you do, you could skip out of here now' (M,30).

The most exceptional thing about Celia, and Murphy's love for her, when considered in the light of the whole of Beckett's oeuvre, is the structural role of fundamental importance that

<sup>1</sup> The belittling intent is unmistakable if the list of measurements introducing her is related to the similarly laconic description of the Smeraldina in 'Druff': 'Bodies don't matter but hers went something like this: big enormous breasts, big breech, Botticelli thighs, knock-knees ...' (MPK,256).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett (1964), p.13.

they play in this first novel. Love is the mainspring of development in the story. In fact, love wins a moral victory, or inflicts a defeat, in the end, for Murphy is overtaken by death when 'dimly intending to have a short rock and then, if he felt any better, to dress and go ... back to Brewery Road, to Celia, serenade, nocturne, albada' (M,172). Such a role is unthinkable in the later novels where love is consistently related to the sexual act and mercilessly satirised.<sup>1</sup> Celia draws the reader into the novel's world and functions as a pivot between the grotesque outer and mysterious inner realms, and between the comic and basically serious themes. She is perhaps the one genuine concession to tradition. Beckett uses her to assist the reader in finding his bearings in this somewhat unfamiliar fictional world. No such conciliatory gesture is made in succeeding works. Serving as she does to interpret and unify disparate elements, Celia's role is of questionable validity. She lulls the reader into feeling at home in the universe she inhabits, although a world with Murphy as its hero should offer no such sense of security. Her experience gives access to two incompatible realms -- Murphy's chaos and Neary's order -- although they should be mutually exclusive and related by formal means only. Her generally sympathetic depiction confuses our relationship to the novel's world, since it assumes a scale of values which belong to the domain of the society-oriented

<sup>1</sup> Not until Comment c'est, published twenty-three years later, is the possibility of the existence of love re-admitted: 'on est deux mon bras droit le serre contre moi amour peur d'être abandonné un peu de chaque' (CC,82).

traditional novel rather than here. She thus indicates a degree of hesitancy on the part of the writer, an uncertainty of form which does not appear again; for, although she adds to the novel's warmth and richness of experience, she undoubtedly harms the purity of its outlines.

#### IV. Story

If, as a story, Murphy fails to engross us, this is just as it should be. A parody of the developing action expected of the novel, action here is reduced to empty agitation, a fruitless chainlike movement where each link is connected to the following and preceding ones, but none ever catches up with the others (ironically, this chain is finally broken by the pulling of one). The omniscient narrator's portrayal of this patterned, meaningless bustle has a superb visual, cartoon-like quality. The hero, customarily judged in terms of his capacity to act upon his situation, is here only fortuitously related to it, and expends all his energies in efforts to sever the relationship. From the point of view of the story, Murphy's one act of significance -- his decision to take up work at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat -- is totally invalidated since he declines any responsibility for it. He has 'no possibility of ... finding in himself any reason for work taking one form rather than another' (M,19), and so allows his actions to be dictated by his stars, 'the only system outside his own in which he felt the least confidence' (M,19). The stars accordingly perform for Murphy as God does in the Geulincxian world, relating microcosm and

macrocosm.<sup>1</sup> But once he moves into the irrational realm, in which he believes himself to relate to the lunatics, he abandons astrology and resumes responsibility: 'They were his stars, he was the prior system' (M,126). In the realm of social reality, however, he lets himself go with the tide and is responsible for none of the events which engulf him. His change of lodgings, with all its ensuing complications, is brought about through demolition -- an apt symbol for chaos. His employment is occasioned by a chance meeting in a restaurant. His death is due to the anonymous pulling of a lavatory chain, releasing the gas which destroys him -- 'for him henceforward gas would be chaos, and chaos gas' (M,122).

The carefully built-up sense of inevitability of Murphy's death is, in fact, a cheat; death is inevitable for Murphy only in the sense that it is so for us all. Its occurrence is conspicuously bound into the plot, but it does not arise as a necessary consequence of his life. He seems to form his philosophy on the Christian teaching:

For whosoever will save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's, the same shall save it.

For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? (Mark VIII.35-36);

'What shall a man give in exchange for Celia?' (M,19), plays on the succeeding verse. But the absence of a God and Christian values renders his abandonment of worldly life meaningless. He does not find life through losing it: 'By closing time the body,

<sup>1</sup> As Professor Coe perspicaciously remarks, this is 'the supreme and comic irony of Murphy ... the wheel has come full circle, and the supremely rational Cogito leads directly to the "Swami in Berwick Market ..."' (Coe, p. 30).



mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon' (M,187). In the end it is not work that destroys his 'life's goods' (M,49), as we are led to expect: 'In the mercantile gehenna ... one of these [Celia, mind or body] will go, or two, or all' (M,31). Only death stops him returning to Celia, and it is the realisation that he can never be wholly of it that destroys his life in the little world of the mind. Since he is uninvolved and uninterested in what becomes of him in the domain of social reality, it would be incongruous for the reader to be particularly concerned about his fate. His story seems hardly worth the telling and certainly fails to live up to the elaborate formulation Beckett gives it. But if the elaboration is comic, the vanity is essential. It would be clearly unacceptable for Murphy's experience of life to provide anything other than an aborted story, being the product of a mind described by the narrator as not constructed 'on the correct cash-register lines ... for doing sums with the petty cash of current facts' (M,123). The whole point and irony of Beckett's tale lies in its very lack of significance. Beckettian man does not act within and on his environment; his monadic condition prevents him from doing so. A meaningful series of events would be inconsistent with the vision of life portrayed by the novelist.

#### V. Plot

The careful planning and intricacy of the novel's plot is undeniable; so much so, as Professor Fletcher puts it, 'as to

constitute a deliberate défi de maître,<sup>1</sup> when related to the traditional concept of plot. Two quests are treated: Murphy's search for the reality of self in the mental realm, and Neary and Company's search for Murphy in the physical realm; the two quests and two realms are bound together through the additional complication of the love affair between Murphy and Celia. These three strands of narrative are further embellished by tales of sordid affairs, drinking sprees, suicide, kite-flying, petty fraud, care of lunatics, and sundry other minor matters. Celia's paternal grandfather, Mr. Kelly, reflects the split between, and underlines the efforts to connect, the mental and physical domains: 'He found it hard to think, his body seemed spread over a vast area, parts would wander away and get lost if he did not keep a sharp look-out' (M,81);<sup>2</sup> in the closing chapter he is even found attempting to 'measure the distance from the unseen to the seen' (M,190) by means of his kite -- and the logical impossibility of establishing a definable relationship between the two is symbolised by the breaking of his line. No amount of cross-reference can disguise the essentially fragmented structure of the fictional world.

This narrator is clearly no Gide, allowing his story to develop as it will; rather is its course plotted in detail to

<sup>1</sup> Fletcher, Novels, p.41.

<sup>2</sup> Clearly prefiguring the bedridden Malone, also conscious of loss of contact between mind and body: 'Mes bras ... peuvent encore exercer de la force, mais j'ai du mal à les diriger' (MM, 20).

the end. Neary, leader of the secondary characters who come into action in Chapter V, is introduced in association with Murphy in Chapter I. Cooper, whose account of the initial tracing of Murphy in London does not appear until nearly half-way through the book (M,85), appears at the start of Chapter III, correctly placed in Murphy's and Celia's story, unnamed but quite recognisable: 'a man smelling strongly of drink rattled past her down the steps.... He spurned the ground behind him in a spring-heeled manner, as though he longed to run but did not dare' (M,22). The birthmark by which Celia will identify Murphy's charred remains in the closing stages of the novel, 'a huge pink naevus' (M,23), is exposed to view when first we meet them together. The narrator even introduces a little voice (the first of a long line of voices) prophesying to Murphy his imminent death:

"the last at last seen of him  
himself unseen by him  
and of himself" (M,171),

obligingly translated as: "The last Mr. Murphy saw of Mr. Endon was Mr. Murphy unseen by Mr. Endon. This was also the last Murphy saw of Murphy." (M,171). Indeed he deliberately draws our attention to his careful organisation when he provides us with a comical summary of events so far related at the beginning of Chapter VII, or points out that 'It must have been while the chandlers were mocking Murphy that the shocking thing happened' (M,93), or that 'Late that afternoon ... it would be just about the time Celia was telling her story' (M,161). This highly

efficient narrator makes it quite clear to us that he is fully aware of and completely masters the relation between, and order of, events.

#### VI. Narrative Movement

Only the most superficial reading of this novel could see its movement as being linear. The finality of the book's ending, with Murphy's death and the loss of Mr. Kelly's kite, is given an artificial ring, clashing as it does with a general sense of changelessness in the containing universe. Basically, as Wylie quips: 'The horse leech's daughter is a closed system. Her quantum of wantum cannot vary' (M,43). The sun, symbol, as Eugene Webb reminds us, 'of time's inexorableness and its cyclical, repetitious character',<sup>1</sup> shines in this fictional world, from its very first line, 'on the nothing new' (M,5). Murphy begins and ends in his rockingchair; Celia is found at the close back with Mr. Kelly where she started; Neary, Wylie and Miss Counihan revert to their "A wants B, who wants C, who wants A" formula, and Cooper returns to the bottle. This early novel already hints gently at the possibility of endless repetition, although less explicitly than later ones. Where Aristotelian theory would claim that the end of a well-constructed novel should permit nothing to come after it, there are signs in Murphy of the two quests being continued through the person of Celia. Neary and Wylie shift their attentions from Murphy to

<sup>1</sup> Webb, p.43.



Celia; and she, quite early on in the tale, shows the inclination to follow Murphy's path to his own particular Nirvana: 'She could not sit for long in the chair without the impulse stirring, tremulously ... to be naked and bound. She tried to think of Mr. Kelly ... but always the moment came when no effort of thought could prevail against the sensation of being imbedded in a jelly of light' (M,49-50). Even the turn of phrase is echoed to describe Murphy: 'When he was naked he lay down in a tuft of soaking tuffets and tried to get a picture of Celia' (M,171). In the end, Celia's passage from the outer to the inner realm is unmistakably indicated: 'So Neary and Celia cease slowly to need Murphy. He, that he may need her; she, that she may rest from need' (M,175) -- the closed system of the novel's world will still be unvarying in its "quantum of wantum", the movement has come full circle.

#### VII. Narrative Organisation

The meticulous organisation of the novel's plot to form a controlled Jamesean unit, wherein everything has its place and function, is mildly upset by periodic hints that the narrative control of the omniscient narrator is less perfect than he would wish. In contrast with the later novels, the world of Murphy is potentially fertile in people and situations. Extraneous characters force their way in, providing delightful character sketches but clearly forming loose ends in the narrative weave: Neary's policeman -- 'When would he learn not to plunge into the

labyrinths of an opinion when he had not the slightest idea of how he was to emerge?' (M,34); or the previous occupant of Murphy's room, the harlot, 'long past her best, which had been scarlet' (M,9). 'Neary wrote to Herr Kurt Koffka demanding an immediate explanation. He had not yet received an answer' (M,37), and the incident is left amusingly suspended, never to be wound into the central pattern. The extent of the various characters' development is not always consistent with their contribution to the story. We know as much about Ticklepenny or Miss Dew, very minor pawns indeed, as we do about Celia, Queen of the board. The plot is sufficiently clear-cut and its setting sufficiently substantial to bear the weight of this superfluous material, which incidentally demonstrates the fecundity of Beckett's imagination; but it does suggest the hidden threat that, if left without check, a plethora of people and incidents would pour into his fictional world and swamp it. This proliferative tendency of the imagination is of particular significance in the later novels where the reader is more aware of the rift between man's mind and outer reality, and the distinction between the writer's creative act and his conception of truth is increasingly blurred. In the context of this first novel, however, it displays itself as one among a variety of means for deflating the rather fussy and self-important plot.

A further point of deliberate imbalance in the narrative arises from the amount of time devoted to the giving of,

conventionally speaking, "unnecessary detail", not selected according to the criterion of plot requirements. The list of Celia's measurements given in Chapter II, and the full transcript of Murphy's game of chess with Mr. Endon, suitably commented upon, in Chapter XI, are the most obvious cases, since both matters could be more appropriately and evocatively dealt with, if the intention is to sustain the reader's interest that is, in a few descriptive phrases. The intricacies of Murphy's swindling .83 of a cup of tea, the detailed description of his clothing, the architecture and organisation of the M.M.M. certainly do not merit the amount of space devoted to them if judged in terms of their contribution to the story. While most such passages have undoubted comic value, they do slow down and distract attention from the main stream of narrative -- a point which contributes to the book's merit as a parody while harming its superficial claims to interest as a traditional novel. More important, however, is the fact that such details, while at most mere decoration in relation to plot, are highly significant from the point of view of the vision of life projected in Murphy. In this world 'the nature of outer reality remained obscure' (M,122); accordingly there is no means of assessing the meaning of events, nor any reason for attributing more importance to one matter than another. It is therefore both logical and essential that selection for inclusion in the narrative of any particular matter should be arbitrary rather than indicative of intrinsic interest. Indeed, where reality is

problematical, it is natural that the more simple and lacking in possible interpretations the subject-matter, the easier it is to formulate, and the greater the likelihood that it will be dwelt upon (a point that has a special bearing on the content of Watt). While the question of choice of material for inclusion in the story raises few difficulties here, where the guide-lines of the traditional novel are still available, it causes serious difficulties in the later novels where the demands of plot play little or no part.

Causality is totally undermined in Murphy through disruption of the time sequence; we are tossed back and forth in time in a manner calculated to deprive the story of any appearance of logical continuity, and the development of interest and suspense is deliberately obstructed. The piecemeal presentation of events, in addition to increasing unnecessarily the difficulty of following the complicated plot, invalidates every decision to act by one means or another, so that failure is the only outcome we expect to action. We meet Neary trying to bash his brains out, so that when he subsequently tells us of his attempts to win Miss Counihan from Murphy the result is a foregone conclusion. We have already read Cooper's frantic telegrams of success and subsequent discomfiture before we hear him relating at length how he found and lost Murphy in London; indeed the first page of the novel warns us of Murphy's prospective housemove, so that even the surprise ending to Cooper's tale is lost. When finally the Neary contingent manages to trace Celia, we long since have been



told that Murphy has left her, so their exultation is falsified. Even poor Murphy's single valid act, after 'the sixpence worth of sky changed again, from the poem that he alone of all the living could write to the poem that he alone of all the born could have written' (M,126), when he takes over from his stars in deciding to make a definitive break with Celia, is undermined by the order of relating events; Miss Carridge has long before told Celia how he collected his bag and his chair. In fact, Celia clearly anticipated his departure, since she 'unpacked her bag, but not Murphy's' (M,103) on moving into the "old boy's" room. In this novel, where events have significant consequences they are debunked through being motiveless, and where they are human-motivated they are debunked through being stripped of consequences by prior revelation.

A major deflationary technique, in Murphy, appears in the guise of intentionally misplaced emphasis. What should be the climax of the novel, since it is logically that of the story, Murphy's death, is not so presented. Instead its importance is played down by all possible means; it is an utter anticlimax. The narrator so stresses the installation of the highly dangerous gas heating system in his garret, that the mortal accident it causes can come as no great surprise. Not once but twice is the chain accidentally pulled before it finally brings about the hero's death (M,120-1 & 131). Indeed the simple statement that 'The gas went on in the w.c.' (M,173) is considered sufficient

intimation of impending death. Just in case we should be in any doubt about this finalising event, the writer heralds its coming, echoing 'So all things hobble together for the only possible' (M,155) in 'So all things limp together for the only possible' (M,160) -- and the disparaging verbs do nothing to add to the impressiveness of the occasion. Actually, the moment of death itself is omitted. At the end of Chapter XI the reader may deduce its approach, and in Chapter XII its occurrence is presumably to be understood in 'the shape of an assurance from Dr. Angus Killiecrankie that so far as the fear of missing Murphy was concerned, they might all take the air without the least anxiety' (M,175) -- hardly the tone for reference to an event of deep significance. In the world of his followers, by the time Murphy actually dies his loss is of little importance. Celia is already reconciled to the end of their relationship; and Neary is in the process of shifting his attention to her, so that his companions, whose principal need is to please him, no longer require Murphy. Finally, to the question of Murphy's search for self in the mental world, his death furnishes no answer for the reader. Either the material world has destroyed his real self, or else that self has passed beyond the limits of the novel's world and can no longer be explored in it. In either event we can never know the effect of death upon the hero's mind, so that it does not even bear on the philosophical themes. The author even draws attention to his inability to enlighten us,

by formal means: 'Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free', he says of Murphy's final moments of consciousness in his chair; then 'The gas went on in the w.c., excellent gas, superfine chaos. / Soon his body was quiet.' (M,173) -- symmetry calls for information about his freedom, but the call goes unheeded. Thus the logical climax of the novel is reduced to an ambiguous and unspecified moment, from which all meaning and interest is sapped.

Instead of directing our attention to the event which resolves the complexities of plot, the organisation of the narrative is carefully worked to highlight a purely extraneous event: the ex-butler's suicide. 'A shocking thing had happened' (M,75), we are dramatically told at the end of Chapter V, and are kept waiting in comic suspense for two whole chapters before being enlightened -- the entirety of one being exasperatingly devoted to the description of Murphy's mind.<sup>1</sup> Then, however, instead of the reversal of fortunes in Aristotelian mode that we have been led to expect, we are presented with an irrelevant suicide which in no way contributes to the development of the action, except to permit a rather superfluous room change. It serves the additional anticlimactic purpose of providing an occasion for the enrichment of the caricature of Miss Carridge. Despite its central position in the novel and its exceptional treatment as the one episode for which suspense is built up, the "shocking

<sup>1</sup> This is a typical Sternian device and supports Professor Fletcher's emphasis on the influence of Sterne on Beckett, particularly evident in the early fiction (see Fletcher, Art, pp.83-95).

thing" has no organic function whatsoever. Organisation is specifically aimed at producing a travesty of the well-made novel.

The incident of the ex-butler's suicide stands in ironic contrast to the hero's grotesque, accidental death. It is treated in great detail where Murphy's demise passes almost unnoticed. The former shocks through its unexpected violence;<sup>1</sup> the latter is taken for granted and never really visualised by the reader. This "faulty" emphasis is in perfect keeping with the novel's parodic nature, underlining as it does the plot's failure to grip the imagination. It also serves to make the point that the traditional novel cannot contain Beckett's vision of life, since this vision excludes the possibility of significant action. 'An automatic adjustment of the human organism to the conditions of its existence,' said Beckett in Proust, 'has as little moral significance as the casting of a clout when May is or is not out' (Pr,20). Murphy is therefore a parody by necessity and not by choice. This suicide is the one true act of the book -- a man deliberately cutting his own throat -- and it is totally isolated from the mainstream of narrative, deprived of any but the most frivolous consequences (Celia's new room and Miss Carridge's financial gain). This is the only possible result of action in Murphy's world, where the mind has no power over matter and can only turn in upon itself in search of a justification for existence.

<sup>1</sup> Such gratuitous violence figures more importantly in the later works, where it is a dominant feature indicating the basic irrationality of the world.



### VIII. The Time Factor

One of the basic organising principles in any novel is the time factor; this is as true of Tristram Shandy as it is of Tom Jones, and Beckett too exploits it to the full. E. M. Forster distinguishes between time as it impresses itself on the individual and chronology, 'the life in time and the life by values',<sup>1</sup> and both are clearly essential to the novel. But where for Forster the precious moment that opens on Eternity is still encompassed in time, life by values in Murphy is atemporal. This, for Beckett, is a philosophical necessity and its logical consequence appears in the organisation of Murphy where the "little world of the mind", the only possible home of values, and the physical world, the domain of time, are mutually exclusive: 'Murphy's mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without' (M,76). Thus the description of the hero's mind is given a chapter to itself, isolated from the temporal flow and rudely breaking in on it. It is discursively treated, not narrated, thereby being dissociated from the chain of events in time. K.W. Gransden finds this 'a clumsy device for an existential writer',<sup>2</sup> but, when considered in this light, it seems logical and philosophically sound -- not to mention its comic value. In fact there are two dramatic presentations of Murphy's mind, when we follow its flow

<sup>1</sup> Aspects of the Novel (1927), p.44.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Dustman Cometh', Encounter IX (July 1958), 84. And Beckett would hardly accept the appellation "existential", particularly not in Murphy.

of images. The first is after the circular, self-absorbed chess game -- an active doing of a nothing which encourages the experience of nothingness in the mind:

Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat ... His other senses also found themselves at peace ... the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real. Time did not cease, that would be asking too much, but the wheel of rounds and pauses did (M,168).

Murphy momentarily experiences a temporal continuum which is the only way the imagination can conceive of the eternity of the void. Ironically, it is immediately following this satisfying venture into the inner world that Murphy's illusions are shattered -- when he realises, through gazing into Mr. Endon's unseeing eyes, that total inversion means total isolation. Since he still clings, however reluctantly, to outer reality, he can no longer face the solitude of atemporality:

[He] tried to get a picture of Celia. In vain. Of his mother. In vain.... Scraps of bodies, of landscapes ... lines and colours evoking nothing, rose and climbed out of sight before him ... It was his experience that this should be stopped ... before the deeper coils were reached (M,171-2).

And so he returns to the temporal world, and Celia; time wins in the end; "life by values" gives way to "life by the clock".

"Life by the clock" has an amusing twist to its organising function in Murphy, since two methods of time evaluation are used to differentiate between the anti-social life of Murphy and the worldly life of Neary and Co. Murphy, who allows his life to be directed by his stars, is suitably associated with

the repetitive temporal course of the heavenly bodies. Man-made chronology is meaningless to him. When first we meet him, 'a cuckoo-clock, having struck between twenty and thirty' (significantly a senseless chime), counts among disliked sounds, because 'They detained him in a world to which they belonged, but not he, as he fondly hoped' (M,5). He is located in time by the vaguest possible means: day-time -- 'The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free' (M,5),<sup>1</sup> 'the poor old sun in the Virgin again for billionth time' (M,5);<sup>2</sup> night-time -- 'The moon, by a striking coincidence full and at perigee, was 29,000 miles nearer the earth than it had been for four years' (M,22). Tellingly, the latter episode continues: 'It was after ten when Celia reached the mew', but the clock time is specifically related to Celia where the moon serves as general introduction.<sup>3</sup> Fittingly, Murphy's first association with a specific unit of calendar time is made by his "Thema Coeli": 'the very first fourth to fall on a Sunday in 1936' (M,27) is indicated as the best day

<sup>1</sup> The omniscient narrator is aware, if Murphy is not, of the inexorability of time; as Beckett says in Proust: 'There is no escape from the hours and the days' (Pr,13).

<sup>2</sup> A typical Beckettian equivocation, relating the mechanism of time to the mechanism of sex - as portrayed in Miss Counihan's world - so that sex becomes another of Beckett's 'attributes of the Time cancer', like Memory and Habit (Pr,18).

<sup>3</sup> The symbolic value of the moon is clear in a passage from 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women' quoted by Lawrence Harvey: 'live things cannot be active quietly, ... the neighbour is not a moon, slow wax and wane of phases, changeless in a tranquility of changes' (Harvey, p.316).

to start work. As the needs of social life disrupt his mode of existence, when Celia forces him to job-hunt, man-made time units affect him increasingly, first the hours of the clock: 'The punctuality with which Murphy returned was astonishing.... Celia wondered how anyone so vague about time in every other way could achieve such inhuman regularity in this one instance' (M,51), then the days of the week: 'He said he would present himself at the M.M.M. the following Sunday morning, whenever that was' (M,66). Nonetheless the author carefully dissociates Murphy from his comic summary of calendar-time: 'The encounter ... between Murphy and Ticklepenny, took place on Friday, October the 11th (though Murphy did not know that)' (M,81). Indeed, for Murphy's benefit he accompanies each indication of calendar time with the corresponding heavenly version: 'the sun being still in the Virgin', 'as the sun with a sigh of relief passed over into the Balance', 'the moon being full again, but not nearly so near the earth as when last in opposition' (M,81) -- and the amusing sexual double-meanings are still in evidence. For Murphy the names of days are symbols not identities; economically, his sacrifice of self to life-in-the-world takes place on Friday, for him 'day of execution, love and fast' (M,99) -- again the Christian echo. As a working member of society he is forced to admit the social chronological system: 'He knew perfectly well the day was Sunday'; but he still feels constrained to add: 'it was essential that it should be' (M,99).



By the end of his week's work his stars are forsaken. For Murphy the surd, the only non-puppet, the one whose birth cry was off the note, it is logically impossible to live totally within society's time-scheme; the days of the week are the nearest he gets to allowing it to impinge on his consciousness -- never is he portrayed as conscious of the date. Hours and days recur, but to use dates is getting a bit too near the bone; they over-identify moments of time for someone whose aim is existence outside time. Sunday, October 4th, 1936 (his lucky day) is an isolated point in time which no Murphy could be expected to recognise except as an abstract number. But man exists in time and Murphy is no exception, despite his ambitions. With his astrological system broken down, and his inability to immerse himself in society's chronological system, he has no alternative but to depart from time or life, and so he dies.<sup>1</sup>

The Neary contingent, on the other hand, is tightly bound to calendar time. Neary and Wylie introduce the first mention of dates in relation to the novel's time-scheme: 'In Dublin, a week later, that would be September 19th, Neary ... was recognised by a former pupil called Wylie' (M,33). Every step they take is carefully dated. Chapters IV, VII and XII begin with a date, and Chapter X ends with one -- they are pinpointed in time in every section of the book devoted to them. Miss

<sup>1</sup> On a Freudian level his death thus becomes a delightfully psychosomatic accident.

Carriage comes into her own in Chapter VIII, and she too is immediately marked with the worldly stamp: 'That day, Friday, October the 11th, ... Miss Carriage found her bread' (M,93).

Celia's structural function as a unifying factor is reinforced by her relation to both temporal systems. Her very name, as Eugene Webb notes, relates her 'to the solar and sidereal cycles of the temporal scheme'.<sup>1</sup> She herself gives the chronology of her affair with Murphy, in her conversation with Mr. Kelly, in terms of the positions of the heavenly bodies. Her use of Murphy's idiom clearly shows that she identifies herself with him, and that their relationship belongs to the natural divisions of time rather than to the more repulsive human ones: 'It was on the street, the previous midsummer's night, the sun being then in the Crab, that she met Murphy' (M,13). More socially inclined, she names her times, but makes them subject to Murphy's astrological indications: 'On the following Sunday, the moon being at conjunction, he proposed to her', 'Murphy said they must get married ... before the moon came into opposition. Now it was September, the sun was back in the Virgin, and their relationship had not yet been regularized' (M,15) - again the double meaning. As with Murphy, once mundane matters violate their sanctuary, the stars lose their grip and time begins to be counted in society's terms again: 'Yes, June to October ...

<sup>1</sup> Webb, p.46.

she had almost five months' experience of Murphy' (M,48). With Murphy gone, it is even more noticeable: 'On Monday Miss Carridge asked where he was.... On Tuesday Miss Carridge asked when she expected him back.... On Wednesday Miss Carridge received a new lot of samples and brought up the tea' (M,100). After Murphy's death she is placed firmly back in the temporal world of Wylie and Miss Counihan, located next to them in space and time: 'Forenoon, Wednesday, October the 23rd.... Cooper sat ... beside the driver, Wylie between Celia and Miss Counihan' (M,174). And the last chapter finds her, 'Late afternoon, Saturday, October the 26th' (M,188), no longer needing the presence of the Dublin contingent to guarantee her relationship with calendar time. It is noteworthy, however, that it is not until Murphy's influence is dead that she is pinned down in time to a specific date.

The gradation between the chronological system of the heavenly bodies and that of humanity is thus used to outline the fluctuations in the tug-of-war between the outer and inner worlds.<sup>1</sup> Strictly speaking, of course, no real gradation is possible between the cyclical natural scheme and the linear human one; but the device of using the recurring elements in the man-made scheme -- names of hours, days and months -- without attaching the distinguishing element of date, gives the illusion of relationship. The author's method of time evaluation neatly

<sup>1</sup> This conflicts with Professor Federman's view that 'Time is not ... an integral theme of this novel; it is merely superimposed on the characters' actions' (Federman, p.69).



concurr with the dichotomous vision of life his novel portrays: in both cases two opposing concepts are presented with a semblance of relationship. While the facetious treatment of time in Murphy prevents us from giving its philosophical implications serious thought, the conflict between temporality and timelessness or eternity, which increases in tension as the novels progress, is already implicit in its comic dual chronometry.

#### IX. Viewpoint and Narrative Techniques

The viewpoint of the all-powerful narrator is exploited in this novel to emphasise the gap between reality and fiction, between the chaos of the one and the organisation of the other -- an incompatibility that assumes thematic significance in the succeeding works. The author's deliberate distortion of the logical order of events, with its consequent devaluation of plot, keeps the notion of the fundamental arbitrariness of the novel's organisation constantly at the back of our minds. That the narrative is ultimately fiction (i.e. an imaginative structure), and not an interpretation of fact, is pointed up by the repeated reminders of the discrepancy between the novel's world and our own. The omniscient narrator plays games with time and space, switches his perspective with no effort to effect smooth transitions, and constantly remarks on his own role as creator; tongue-in-cheek pretensions to realism are contrasted with blatant references to the fictional nature of the material. The conflict between reality and fiction is mainly turned to comic effect in Murphy, where the degree of sophistication required



to appreciate its philosophical implications would be out of keeping with the simplistic approach to life depicted, but the narrator is careful to prevent identification of his views with his hero's, through the occasional pejorative comment as we have seen, so that the way is paved for the self-conscious narrator-heroes to come to take the problem seriously.

An excellent example of the variety of devices called on to hinder the suspension of disbelief is found in Chapter II, which is worth examining from that angle. The devices frequently parody the traditional novel-writing techniques and so contribute to the book's debunking aspect. Celia's story is presented by the standard epic method of throwing the reader into the middle of the action and gradually filling in the background. Instead, however, of conforming to the accepted technique of easing the required information as imperceptibly as possible into the narrative, Beckett deliberately draws attention to her description by listing it at the head of the chapter, given in more detail than the average person could supply without the aid of a measuring-tape (thereby guaranteeing the narrator an omniscience that such later remarks as 'the next day was Saturday [if our reckoning is correct]', M,104, cannot undermine). Thus we are offered a travesty of the conventional eulogistic introduction of the heroine, and, in addition, through the arbitrary positioning of the list, humorous emphasis is thrown on the narrator's all-powerful position in relation to his tale. A paragraph takes Celia to Mr. Kelly's side, and a paragraph

describes him. Inserted between the two, a single line is isolated in a paragraph all to itself, emphasising its incongruity in giving the uncalled-for information that 'She had left Ireland at the age of four' (M,12). Celia's meeting with Murphy is introduced in mock-realistic terms which demote the narrator to editor-status, implying a concision and clarity which the episode totally fails to provide: 'Celia's account, expurgated, accelerated, improved and reduced, of how she came to have to speak of Murphy, gives the following' (M,12). "The following", however, does not follow immediately as promised -- the narrator is incompetent; instead, clumsily obvious since it frustrates our expectations, a witty summary of Celia's life intrudes, quite superfluous for Mr. Kelly for whose benefit it claims its right to be there, but informative for the reader; its expository intent cannot be overlooked. A passage from 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women', quoted by Lawrence Harvey, supports the view that Beckett's aim here is to parody the nineteenth-century, Zolaesque concept of character:

Milieux, race, family, structure, temperament, past and present and consequent and antecedent back to the first combination and the papas and mammas and paramours and cicisbei and the morals of Nanny and the nursery wallpapers and the third and fourth generation snuffles. ... That tires us.... The background pushed up as a guarantee ... that tires us (Harvey, p.340).

While the main problem in the introductory part of the chapter is that the narrative flow is intentionally jerky where it should be smooth, the reverse is the case during the actual

account of Celia's affair. Here no attempt is made to differentiate formally between the various temporal planes, although the reader is bounced back and forth in time like a rubber ball. The result is both extremely confusing -- 'She halted -- "Get away!" said Mr. Kelly -- set herself off in the line that his Murphy's eyes must take on their next declension and waited' (M,13) -- and highly amusing:

On the following Sunday ... he proposed to her in the Battersea Park sub-tropical garden ...

Mr. Kelly groaned.

Celia accepted.

"Wretched girl," said Mr. Kelly, "most wretched." (M,15).

Sly attention is drawn to this will-o'-the-wisp technique through the mouth of Mr. Kelly: '"Hey!" exclaimed Mr. Kelly, "don't skip about like that, will you?"' (M,15). The device has the effect of putting the two points in time on the same level of perspective, obliterating any sense of distance and thus implying the artificiality of fictional time. Sterne uses a similar technique in Tristram Shandy to express the simultaneity of different moments in time as they are conceived in the creator's mind. In Murphy, however, since the conscious mind controlling the story is outside it, these juxtapositions withdraw the reader from the novel's world, forcing a third point in time, that in which the book is read, into our consciousness, and thus serving principally to widen the gap between reality and fiction.

The author's refusal to take his story seriously is reflected in the inconsistency of his viewpoint and verbal tenses. As

seen in Chapter II, the simple narrative past can suddenly shift to the more complex system of being an account of someone else's account, as it does for Wylie's and Cooper's background stories also, thus removing the fictional past one step further from experienced reality. But the present tense appears too, so that sometimes the narrative momentarily switches to mock-drama: 'Enter Cooper. Like a mollusc torn from its rock WyHe came away' (M,83), 'The hot water bag burst on the floor without a sound, so that water is oozing towards the centre of the floor throughout the scene that follows' (M,142) -- this mixture hints at the author's consciousness, planning the scene as he is about to commit it to paper. We even have a mock dramatic presentation in the past:

"... This was also the last Murphy saw of Murphy."

A rest.

"The relation between Mr. Murphy and Mr. Endon could not have been better summed up than by the former's sorrow at seeing himself in the latter's immunity from seeing anything but himself."

A long rest (M,171).

The capricious alterations in temporal viewpoint further complicate the involved chronology of the novel's plot. The narrator openly calls attention to the contrast between the time sequence of the story and that of its telling: 'Let us now take Time that old fornicator ... back to Monday, October the 7th' (M,81). He even gives us a summary of the time-scheme, in case we should have become too confused: 'Celia's triumph over Murphy ... was gained about the middle of September ... Wylie rescued Neary ...





a week later ... The encounter... between Murphy and Tickle-penny, took place on Friday, October the 11th' (M,81), thereby underlining his function as originator of the chronological system.<sup>1</sup>

The same kind of tricks are played with space, although with greater caution. In the main, the location of the story in space runs according to the chronology, as convention would have it do. However, in Chapter VII, there is an abrupt alteration in perspective from a summing-up of the novel's temporal structure to a revelation of its world in spatial terms. We switch from men in general -- 'Respectable people were going to bed' (M,81) -- to Mr. Kelly -- 'Mr. Willoughby Kelly lay back' (M,81) -- thence to Neary and finally to Miss Counihan and Wylie, all depicted at the same moment in time. Dylan Thomas uses this parallel form of presentation, rather than sequential, in Under Milk Wood; but where Thomas' perspective is consistent, permitting the absorption of the reader (or listener), Beckett's intrusive alteration in the mode of projection spotlights the narrative technique and once again undermines the novel's pretensions as interpreter of reality. In the parting scene between Murphy and Celia, there is an even more startling spatial

<sup>1</sup> Hugh Kenner points to this device in the recently published novel Mercier et Camier, where it recurs every third chapter, and explains it as possibly an effort by the narrator 'to facilitate review, or to emphasize the fuguelike interplay of incident, or simply to make it quite clear that he has not been woolgathering but knows very well what he has just finished writing' -- Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study, p.73.

shift, blocking the reader's sentimental involvement: 'There was a long silence, Celia forgiving Murphy for having spoken roughly to her, Miss Counihan, Wylie and Cooper breaking their fast on the Liverpool-London express' (M,97). The comic intrusion here is such an abuse of the omniscient narrator's role as controller of the narrative that its debunking intent is unmistakable.

X. The Thematic Factor

Murphy does not depend for its shape on theme and motif to such a large extent as the later novels, but they do play their part in patterning the text, highlighting the architecture, and integrating thought into structure. Ruby Cohn, discussing Beckett's French novels, demonstrates that the theme of 'single-minded and compulsive quest', inherited from medieval romance of knights errant, 'structures all the novels, down to the most apparently irrelevant detail'.<sup>1</sup> While the quest theme underlies the English novels also, it does not play the essentially determinative role in relation to content in this first novel that it assumes thereafter. It is, however, an important element in determining the book's shape, since it provides the basis for the system of contrasts on which the structure clearly depends. Minor themes cut across the structural outlines, echoing back and forth between the two worlds, and connecting the novel's rigidly separated sections. Of these, some which develop into themes of major importance in succeeding works are

<sup>1</sup> 'Still Novel', YFS No.24 (Fall 1959), pp. 48-49.

already discernible: the identification of opposites and the failure of language are clearly if lightly treated, while such themes as human isolation, the impossibility of true knowledge, the rejection of life, and the mystery of death, which are to thread their way right through Beckett's writings, are sporadically hinted at throughout the text, but not really developed.

The dual form taken by the quest theme in Murphy appears as an outward-looking tendency, expressed in the constant movement and chatter of Neary's group hunting for Murphy, opposed to an inward-looking tendency, expressed in the hero's attraction to stasis and silence -- Murphy who, 'while still less than a child, had set out to capture himself' (M,138).<sup>1</sup> The alternating development of the two conflicting tendencies gives the book a jerky comic rhythm, backed up by the opposition of passages of tedious development and others of excessive concision, or the presentation of extremely lengthy paragraphs interspersed with single-lined ones. Murphy is usually seated or looking for a seat. Neary, Wylie, Miss Counihan and Cooper are usually either coming or going. And Celia spends some of her time in Murphy's rockingchair, and some chasing around with the others. The dominant pattern of alternating motion and

<sup>1</sup> Michael Robinson, The Long Sonata of the Dead: A Study of Samuel Beckett (1969), presents the structural split in philosophical terms as 'the contrast between the Cartesian and the Newtonian attitudes' (p.95).



stillness is relieved from monotony through the introduction in each element's domain of its opposite. Thus Neary, while waiting to set out in chase after Murphy, 'relaxed and went to bed, vowing not to get up till news of Murphy should be brought to him' (M,136). And Murphy's rockingchair provides the ideal form of movement without change of place; in it he can move frantically back and forth, while his body is bound firmly into immobility. Motion is his means to a halt: 'Most things under the moon got slower and slower and then stopped, a rock got faster and faster and then stopped. Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free' (M,10); and physical quiescence permits mental participation in the 'flux of forms' (M,79) of the deep third zone of the mind. Neary apes this on-the-spot movement, as he waits in Mooney's public house for word from Cooper: 'There he sat all day, moving slowly from one stool to another until he had completed the circuit of the counters' (M,42).

The identification of opposites is a philosophical concept which reappears in different guises throughout Beckett's work. In his essay on Joyce he referred to Bruno's belief in the coincidence of contraries, and one of his examples has obvious bearing on the reasons for Murphy's love of his rockingchair: 'Maximal speed is a state of rest'.<sup>1</sup> In Murphy contraries

<sup>1</sup> 'Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce', p.6; another example: 'no difference between the infinite circle and the straight line' (p.6), bears on another of Beckett's themes; and, when we read his account of Vico's developments on Bruno, the merging of linear and circular movements in Murphy is analysed for us: 'Thus we have the spectacle of a human progression that depends for its movement on individuals, and which at the same time is independent of individuals in virtue of what appears to be a preordained cyclicism' (p.6).



meet on levels varying from comic realism to poetic symbolism. Closely related to the theme of language failure, it first appears in Celia's memory of the time 'when the barges had waved ... yes to her. Or had they meant no? The distinction was so nice' (M,22-3), and the narrator echoes her: '"Yes or no?" said Murphy. The eternal tautology' (M,32). For Murphy, life and death are interchangeable: 'My life-warrant,' he says of his horoscope, 'Thank you' (M,25). His birthmark acting as his identifying mark in death is the most practical use of the theme; 'birthmark deathmark, I mean, rounding off the life somehow, don't you think, full circle' (M,182), says the coroner, associating it with the plot structure. The birth/death identification is comically reflected in Murphy's '"Is that the nursery?" ... "No," said Ticklepenny, "the mortuary."' (M,115), ironically in Celia's 'seeking the rime, the panting syllable to rime with breath, ... dead to the voices of the street' (M,156), and symbolically in the author's depiction of Celia, seated in her room which is never quiet, 'but brightening and darkening in a slow ample flicker that went on all day, brightening against the darkening that was its end' (M,49).

The failure of language, a theme of crucial importance from Watt on, occurs here mainly on a light vein. Disparaging remarks jest at man's inability to control words; ironically, these are principally associated with Wylie, the glibbest tongue of the book. Mostly the gibes are mildly amusing: 'He stood

... one hand behind him holding the handle, the other describing the gesture that he always used when words were inadequate to conceal what he felt' (M,91), 'My one dread was lest our conversation of last night should resume us where it left us off' (M, 153-4), 'silence, that frail partition between the ill-concealed and the ill-revealed, the clumsily false and the unavoidably so' (M,176). Even the narrator has his little joke: 'And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word' (M,6), echoed much later in the same context: 'So pleasant that pleasant was not the word' (M,79). But the disillusioned, bitter ring the theme develops in the later novels already sounds in Wylie's 'Once a certain degree of insight has been reached ... all men talk, when talk they must, the same tripe' (M,44) -- subtly hinting at the ultimate sameness of things expressed in the identification of opposites. And Celia foreshadows the despair of L'innommable: 'She felt ... spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next' (M,31-2). Nonetheless, Murphy does not reveal the fundamental distrust of language which lies at the heart of the rest of Beckett's work. The problem here is only marginal and this is clear from the fact that Murphy himself is never involved in it. No later hero could share the superiority of his attitude to Celia: '"Not the slightest idea," he murmured, "of what her words mean. No more insight into their implications than a parrot into its profanities."' (M,31).

# XI. Repetition

The simple device of repetition is an important feature in the structuring of this novel, as it is all through Beckett's work. "Linking phrases and images"<sup>1</sup> help us follow the different threads of story and highlight the novel's outlines. Professor Federman points out that the structure is built 'on the recurrence of various attributes'<sup>2</sup>-- Celia's prostitution, Cooper's ailments, Neary's needs for intoxicant and friendship, Kelly's kites, Wylie's need for sex and money, Miss Carridge's smell, Ticklepenny's homosexuality, Murphy's chair. Characters even produce their little identifying phrases: Neary has his chequebook and variants on 'You shall find me [I think] not ungrateful' (M, 46 & 136), Miss Carridge her cups of tea and 'Drink it before it coagulates [curdles]' (M, 50 & 93),<sup>3</sup> and Celia and Murphy share their 'serenade, nocturne [and] albada' (M, 54 & 172). The three major time shifts for information purposes are isolated and emphasised through sharing the same mock-realistic introduction: 'Celia's [Neary's/Cooper's] account, expurgated, accelerated, improved and reduced, of how ..., gives the following' (M, 12, 37 & 84). Murphy's final exit is signalled by reintroducing the closing lines of his first

<sup>1</sup> The terms are Eugene Falk's, Types of Thematic Structure (Chicago 1967), pp. 12-15.

<sup>2</sup> Federman, p.68.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Lemuel's version of the phrase in Malone meurt: 'Mange-le pendant qu'il est bouillant' (MM, 175).

appearance: 'Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free' (M,10 & 173). Celia's moments of solitude are drawn together by similar means. The first, when she threatens to leave Murphy, is related to the end, when she has lost him forever, through the nostalgic motif of Irish skies: 'The sky, cool, bright, full of movement, anointed her eyes, reminded her of Ireland' (M,32), 'Celia also looked at the sky ... simply to have that unction of soft sunless light on her eyes that was all she remembered of Ireland' (M,191). And the rangers' desolate cry which closes the novel echoes those heard during her lonely walk through Kensington Gardens after Murphy first leaves her: 'All out. All out' (M,106,191 & 192).

The recurring motif of the closed system, related to appetites and needs in the domain of phenomena and to solipsism in the inner domain of thought, is the perfect symbol for this novel's dichotomous world. The closed system of social reality, the horse leech's daughter, is specifically mentioned four times (M,43,72,83 & 137), and clearly evoked in the tales of Neary's love affairs -- he even 'scratches himself out of one itch into the next' (M,138). Murphy's mind is openly referred to as 'a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own, self-sufficient and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body' (M,77); and Mr. Endon's chess game, completely oblivious of Murphy, turning back on itself, mirrors the world of the mind, full of movement without change.



The omniscient narrator's function as creator and manipulator of the novel's people is spotlighted by the puppet/pawn motif running through the book. Mr. Kelly is the first obvious one: 'Mr. Kelly fell back in the bed, which closed his eyes, as though he were a doll' (M,12), and shortly afterwards 'He started up in the bed, which opened his eyes, as he knew perfectly well it would' (M,15). Ticklepenny is described as: 'The merest pawn in the game between Murphy and his stars, he makes his little move, engages an issue and is swept from the board' (M,61) -- here, significantly, Murphy is one of the players. The Dublin contingent is grouped on the chessboard too: 'All four are now in position' (M,158). According to the narrator: 'All the puppets in this book whinge sooner or later, except Murphy, who is not a puppet' (M,86),<sup>1</sup> but even the hero is not completely free of the suggestion of fictional manipulation: 'Murphy sat out of [the sun], as though he were free' (M,5).<sup>2</sup> By calling attention to the author as creator of the fiction, this motif plays its part in upsetting the suspension of disbelief and thus belittles the novel's claims to reveal truth through creating the illusion of reality. Linking phrases are used to the same

<sup>1</sup> Michael Robinson explains this as due to the fact that Murphy's inner life is explored, while 'the Newtonians, being mindtight, have no interior life at all' (The Long Sonata of the Dead p.95). This would explain why we are reluctant to reduce Celia to the status of puppet - her inner life is not totally neglected.

<sup>2</sup> The Unnamable says later: 'Je crois que Murphy parlait de temps en temps, ... mais c'était mal fait, je voyais le ventri-loque' (I,126); and the speaker in Textes pour rien even includes himself among the puppets: 'je ne suis ici qu'une poupée de ventri-loque' (NTPR,185).

end, recalling the narrative's origin in a single imagination which draws on the same phrases to express itself. Twice the narrator tells us that 'The human eyelid is not teartight' (M,39 & 82), and twice describes Murphy's eyes as 'cold and unwavering as a gull's' (M,5 & 31).<sup>1</sup> But the different levels of reality are amusingly blurred, just as they were by Murphy's ambiguous relation to the puppet image, when the description of Miss Counihan's overhead view of Wylie and Cooper -- 'two tiny heads in the pillories of their shoulders' (M,92) -- which we are told is 'Murphy's figure' (M,92), is taken over by the narrator to describe Celia's overhead view of Murphy -- 'From the window she saw him ... his head sunk in the pillory of his shoulders' (M,99). Linking phrases and images are thus related to the creative consciousness in a manner slyly suggesting an element of confusion as to the closeness of the relationship between hero and narrator -- a confusion which becomes highly significant in the later French novels.

## XII. Conclusion

Flaubert objected strongly to intrusive narrators: 'C'est un de mes principes : qu'il ne faut pas s'écrire. L'artiste doit être dans son oeuvre comme Dieu dans la Création, invisible et tout-puissant, qu'on le sente partout, mais qu'on ne le voie pas'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> cf. Malone's description of Sapo: 'ses yeux clairs et fixes comme ceux d'une mouette' (MM,32); this reinforces his implied identification with the narrators in Murphy and Watt: 'je me mettais à jouer avec ce que je voyais.... Si je disais, Maintenant j'ai besoin d'un bossu, il en arrivait un aussitôt' (MM,10).

<sup>2</sup> Gustave Flaubert, 'à Mademoiselle Leroyer de Chantepie' (18 mars, 1857), Correspondance 4ème Série (1854-61), (Paris, 1927) p.164.

And Henry James speaks sternly of novelists who give themselves away and refuse to let their fiction be taken seriously, remarking on Anthony Trollope's 'want of discretion in this particular'.<sup>1</sup> But where Madame Bovary or Barchester Towers provide substantial worlds and characters, which do not need support from their authors to give them body, Murphy is so flimsy a structure that the author's presence adds a much needed solidity. From start to finish the writer comments on and guides us through his story, rarely allowing us to enter directly into his world, nor, indeed, ever allowing himself to be fooled by it. The result is that both he and we look down on the fictional world from a superior position and it is never permitted the dignity of appearing to be self-supporting. The narrator's commentary is consistently ironic, forcibly arousing an element of ridicule in our attitude to his offering in perfect keeping with the novel's parodic element.

Characters, story and philosophy are all subjected to the same ironic vision. Judgement is sometimes implicit in the turn of events -- as in Murphy's failure to find company among the inmates of the M.M.M. ('He would not have admitted that he needed a brotherhood. He did': M,122) -- or the choice of imagery -- 'A feature of Miss Gounihan's attitude to Neary had been the regularity of its alternation. Having shown herself cruel, kind, cruel and kind in turn, she could no more welcome his arrival

<sup>1</sup> 'The Art of Fiction', The House of Fiction (1957), ed. Leon Edel, p.26.

at her hotel than green, yellow, green is a legitimate sequence of traffic lights' (M,41). Sometimes it is explicitly stated by the intruding narrator: 'The flow [of Neary's speech] ceased. What truth has not its ballcock?' (M,147), '\*What do you love?' said Murphy. "Me as I am. You can want what does not exist, you can't love it." This came well from Murphy' (M,29). Philosophy is reduced to psychology: '"I don't wonder at Berkeley," said Neary. "... A defence mechanism. Immaterialize or bust' (M,43), while the account of Murphy's mind is compared to a medical report: 'This painful duty having now been discharged, no further bulletins will be issued' (M,80). Murphy, as has been noted, comes in for his share of ironic comment: Neary's view, although cruel, has its justification -- 'That long hank of Apollonian asthenia, ... that schizoidal spasmophile' (M,37); the narrator speaks of 'his parody of rational behaviour' (M,78), and does not let his self-deception go unnoticed:

The frequent expressions apparently of pain, rage, despair and in fact all the usual, to which some patients gave vent, suggesting a fly somewhere in the ointment of Microcosmos, Murphy either disregarded or muted to mean what he wanted (M,124).

Samuel Mintz, while accepting the ironic portrayal of Neary's group, is puzzled by the ironic treatment of Murphy, and suggests that Beckett -- with whose views he entirely identifies Murphy's -- is protecting himself against dismissal by positivist readers.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'Beckett's Murphy: A "Cartesian" Novel', pp.164-165.



But a careful examination of the particular butts of irony shows the narrator in sympathy with Murphy's rejection of social reality -- witness his cruelly comic picture of it -- but objecting to his naïve assumption that inner life is pure bliss. The almost total lack of irony in the depiction of Celia is perhaps less easily condoned.<sup>1</sup>

The novel as an artistic product is also derided. We see the novelist choosing his words: 'This phrase is chosen with care, lest the filthy censors should lack an occasion to commit their filthy synecdoche' (M,55), looking for them: 'a woman ... so -- intact as Celia' (M,49), storytelling: 'The Duck, to give her a name to go on with' (M,69), displaying mock displeasure at his work: 'It is most unfortunate, but the point of this story has been reached where ...' (M,76), passing judgement on his art: 'The above passage is carefully calculated to deprave the cultivated reader' (M,83), and even setting down irrelevant thoughts: 'Celia, thank God for a Christian name at last' (M,156). Impatience at the drudgery of writing is implicit in short-cuts -- as the list of Celia's measurements or: 'All the colour (yellow) had ebbed from his face' (M,25) -- and abrupt transitions -- as after Murphy's night of love with Celia following his rocking-chair accident:

... It was the short circuit so earnestly desired by Neary, the glare of pursuit and flight extinguished.

In the morning he described ... how he came to be in that extraordinary position (M,24).

<sup>1</sup> Professor Fletcher points to the parody of 'the sort of sentimental lending-library romance that recounts a prostitute's redemption...', but the lack of irony in Celia's treatment is not sufficiently compensated for. (Fletcher, Art, p.87.)

The narrator pushes his own personality in front of his characters and addresses the reader directly, in true Swiftean style: 'Try it sometime gentle skimmer' (M,60), or even more Swiftean:

Oh, monster of humanity and enlightenment, despairing of a world in which the only natural allies are the fools and knaves, a mankind sterile with self-complicity, admire Bom feeling dimly for once what you feel acutely so often, Pilate's hands rustling in his mind (M,118).

And the Joycean trick of bringing the book as printed material to our attention appears in 'M.M.M. stood suddenly for music, MUSIC, MUSIC, in brilliant, brevier and canon, or some such typographical scream' (M,161).<sup>1</sup> Its actual lay-out is twice evoked in references to Murphy's mind, 'as described in section six' (M,6 & 10).

Such a mass of references to the novel's fictional nature and its dependence on an external creator cannot but undermine its importance in the reader's eyes, and the consistently supercilious attitude and flippant tone of the narrator point to this being a deliberate policy. As a policy it conforms perfectly with the book's underlying philosophy and its parodic form.

Murphy is revealed as a flimsy edifice in the writer's imagination, and no amount of comic claims to basis in fact (as when the narrator insists he is transcribing the different characters' own accounts, or when he extends the time-scheme beyond the bounds of the story -- 'This unprecedented distribution of visits had a lasting effect on Bom and continued to baffle his ingenuity

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Bloom's visit to the newspaper printing works in Ulysses.

up to and including the day of his death': M,169) can contradict the author's damning remark as Murphy tries vainly to call up specific images in his mind on the day of his death: 'He tried with the men, women, children and animals that belong to even worse stories than this' (M,172). Murphy and all his companions are here clearly relegated to the world of the imagination and even there they occupy a lowly place. This explicit condemnation by the novel's creator is implicit in all the elements of the book's composition.

In Murphy, then, Beckett formulates his way of seeing in the simplest terms possible, while reminding us that 'The definition of outer reality, or of reality short and simple, varie[s] according to the sensibility of the definer' (M,123). Since his vision is essentially complex, its expression here in elementary black and white outlines means that neither he nor we take it too seriously -- an attitude conforming with the comic, self-deflationary structure and ironic tone, and permitted by the narrative viewpoint -- an omniscient narrator powerful enough to control the relationship between reader and novel. As the godless dualism of Beckett's approach to life precludes the establishment of a system of values in the physical world, the absolutes which provide a solid base and firm outlines for the traditional novel are denied it. Thus when he uses the writer's conventional vehicle for communicating his vision of life -- the novel -- the result is bound to be a parody.

Professor Federman sees Murphy as 'a calculated intellectual exercise that coldly mirrors the world of man while subtly revealing the fraudulence of fiction';<sup>1</sup> but it can perhaps be better described as distorting the world of man in order to spotlight the fraudulence of the vision of life portrayed in the traditional novel. For Beckett, Balzac's characters are 'clockwork cabbages', his novels take place 'from beginning to end ... in a spellbound backwash', but why 'Scenes from Life? Why human comedy?'.<sup>2</sup> Reality for Beckett is inward, and the great nineteenth-century novel not only rests on a quite different concept of reality but cannot be coerced into projecting the flux of forms of the little world of the mind.

Having established, in Murphy, the need to give the novel a new form if it is to serve as a container for his concept of reality, Beckett goes on to seek this new form in Watt. Murphy discovered that man cannot turn his back on the physical world, so Watt resolutely faces it, knowing that he exists in it although not of it. The novel's structure must therefore be made flexible enough to contain the realms of both thought and extension, firmly locating man in the former, but portraying him in his struggle to relate to the latter. Relationship for Watt between mind and matter can only be conceived in terms of language, so

<sup>1</sup> Federman, p.67.

<sup>2</sup> 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women', quoted in Harvey, p.341.



that Beckett's second novel becomes an exploration of the ability of the word to relate itself to phenomena. Where Murphy rejects the framework of the traditional novel, Watt goes one step further and rejects the logic of language as incompatible with the disorganised flux of reality; the self-conscious artist, in examining his tools, is now getting down to essentials.

CHAPTER III

W A T T

## I. Introduction

If Murphy portrays man's inability to live in total disregard of the world of phenomena, Watt is concerned with his failure to relate himself to it. Watt retreats from Murphy's extreme philosophical position and attempts to come to terms with matter in an eminently reasonable manner. More sophisticated than Murphy, he is prepared to compromise. He does not require that his truth be absolute: 'Watt's concern ... was not after all with what the figure was, in reality, but with what the figure appeared to be, in reality' (W,226). Any formulation will do; once some name can be given to an object or event, Watt can rest easy in the knowledge that he has established a relationship, however temporary, between the inner and outer worlds. The narrator in 'Love and Lethe' remarked: 'The normal woman of sense asks "what?" in preference to "why?" (this is very deep)' (MPK,123), and, true to his name, Watt does likewise, abandoning the metaphysician's "why" for the Positivist's "what".<sup>1</sup> He attempts to build a bridge of words across the Cartesian chasm between thought and extension; but the bridge ultimately collapses and his 'need of semantic succour' (W,79)

<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Hoefer, in 'Watt', Perspective (Washington University), XI,3 (Autumn 1959), discusses the Positivism of the book's philosophical sub-structure.(pp.166-182).

proves unfulfillable. This novel dramatises the rift between language and reality. The narrative is therefore founded on a more insidious irony than that of Murphy, where the ability of words to convey truth is never questioned by the hero, and only rarely by minor characters. In Watt doubt is more fundamental and the novel's humour is consequently less light-hearted, being more closely related to peculiarities of style hinting at hysteria and despair than to appearances and events such as afforded much of the comic matter in Murphy. To Israel Shenker Beckett said: 'I think anyone nowadays, who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er'.<sup>1</sup> In Watt he exploits that incompetence and, as Hugh Kenner says, the comedy becomes that of a circus clown.<sup>2</sup> But we are forced to experience the clown's perplexity and share his sense of impotence, so that frequently our laughter is neither at nor with him but in sheer self-protection.

In contrast to Murphy, Watt's claims to meet the traditional requirements of the novel are extremely feeble. As David H. Hesla puts it: 'In the earlier novel, time and place were specified, characters were reasonably though eccentrically motivated,

<sup>1</sup> 'Moody Man of Letters', NYT, Section II (6th May, 1956), p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study p.33-34.



and their actions produced not wholly unrelated reactions and consequences'.<sup>1</sup> Watt, by contrast, projects an unstable world, with minimal story interest, little characterisation, virtually no attempt to weave events into a plot, problematical narrative organisation and time-scheme and inconsistent viewpoint. There is no place here for the factual presentation of life that custom demands, since the way of seeing portrayed precludes any definitive statement about outer reality. The parallel with Kafka is inevitably drawn in this regard. Beckett pointed to the Kafka hero's 'coherence of purpose' where his was 'spiritually precarious', and added: 'In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form'.<sup>2</sup> And Ruby Cohn's analysis of the two novels points up Beckett's reproduction of doubt in the actual structure of his book.<sup>3</sup> But doubt, in Watt, also extends to language and ultimately queries the nature of the literary act as such, a degree of self-consciousness entirely excluded from Kafka's intention. Lawrence Harvey sees this book as 'A Novel of the Middle Years of Man',<sup>4</sup> when the needs of youth have

<sup>1</sup> David I. Hesla, 'The Shape of Chaos: A Reading of Beckett's Watt', Critique (Minneapolis), VI,1 (Spring 1963), 86.

<sup>2</sup> Israel Shenker, 'Moody Man of Letters', p.1.

<sup>3</sup> 'Watt in the Light of The Castle', CL, XIII,2 (Spring 1961), 154-166.

Professor Fletcher also points to the less extensive guilt in Watt, the lack of a god rather than the sense of a malignant god in Kafka, and the resulting increase in comic values in Watt (Fletcher, Novels, pp.88-89).

<sup>4</sup> Harvey, p.350.

subsided and the mind can retreat into itself in search of meaning. He sees Watt's journey to Mr. Knott's house as a metaphorical retreat from outer reality, 'a flight from anxiety and pain and a search for peace'.<sup>1</sup> Certainly Watt has lost Murphy's attachments to individual things and people, and the theme of middle-age runs through the book, setting it between the younger Murphy and the decrepit heroes of the French novels; but Watt's retreat from social reality seems more truly a new approach to the world, and the assumption of fresh anxieties and suffering, and his need for meaningful speech is every bit as distressing as Murphy's need for Celia. Watt can indeed be seen as a story of the middle years of man, but it is much else besides -- a search for self, a search for Truth, a grotesque attempt to live out the implications of Positivism as Murphy followed Descartes; no single metaphor encloses it.

## II Fictional World

In Murphy it became clear that the humanistic world which serves as a framework for the traditional novel was not flexible enough to contain Beckettian life. Watt's framework is far from clearcut and is provided by a universe which shifts and decomposes from one point of vision to the next and one moment to the next. It is Montaigne's "branloire perenne", circumscribed

<sup>1</sup> Harvey, p.354.

by its creator in a manner endowing it with a false air of stability. Professor Federman finds that 'between the physical and the mental, the real and the illusory, the rational and the irrational, a clear line of demarcation is established'.<sup>1</sup> He associates the Hackett domain with the physical, the real and the rational, and the Knott domain with their opposites; and he sees the novel as containing a third domain, the asylum, for those who fail to reconcile the inner and outer worlds.<sup>2</sup> It must be pointed out, however, that, while there is clearly a gulf between the physical and mental and the rational and irrational, the material is often so ambiguous that it is impossible to locate with confidence, and the distinction between the real and the illusory is unquestionably blurred -- for example, there is no certainty as to the nature of Watt's voices, or of the figure that approaches him as he leaves Mr. Knott's house. Eugene Webb's distinction 'between those who face the chaotic reality of the universe and those who hide from this vision behind the traditional illusions of their society',<sup>3</sup> seems more acceptable.

<sup>1</sup> Federman, p.95.

<sup>2</sup> Most critics assume that Sam's asylum is a mental home, but this is never clearly stated, although the precedent of Murphy's M.M.M. suggests it. The other meanings of the word -- sanctuary, shelter, refuge -- should not be overlooked. If any retreat from the outer world is depicted in Watt, it is surely the retreat into the sanctuary of the inner world, symbolised in the asylum, after the reality of the outer world, in Mr. Knott's house, has proved unattainable.

<sup>3</sup> Webb, 69.

The framework of Watt is a fictional world whose construction is highly complex and uncertain, sufficiently recognisable for the reader to be prevented from dismissing it as pure fantasy, yet strange enough for him to remain uneasy and confused after his journey through it.

The liminary zones of Watt's world appear to have the characteristics of the stable world of the traditional novel wherein man has his rightful place. But its heart consists of the flux and bewilderment of the Knott domain and the asylum, and the point at which the two realms meet is imperceptible. Murphy's universe of 'the nothing new' (M,5), where for all its eccentricities at least no doubt is cast upon the dependable solidity of the external world, is re-evoked in the opening section of Watt. It has its bench existing to fulfil Mr. Hackett's need, its courting couple's antics, its disgruntled policeman recalling the more amenable Civic Guard in Murphy (and clearly foreshadowing the even more aggressive policeman in Molloy), and its paradoxically predictable skies: 'These north-western skies are really extraordinary, said Goff' (W,13). It is this atmosphere of confident familiarity which reigns in the introductory section of the book, and the main body of Part I -- giving Watt's journey from the Hackett to the Knott domain -- opens literally with a jolt: 'Watt bumped into a porter wheeling a milk-can' (W,22). The close relationship between man and nature is not re-established until the final stages of the book,



a gentle indication of Watt's departure from the scene, in an amusing parody of the humanistic view of life: 'The trembling sea could not but be admired. The leaves quivered, or gave the impression of doing so ... The long summer's day had made an excellent start. If it continued in the same manner, its close would be worth coming to see' (W,245).<sup>1</sup> And it is with comic emphasis on this man-oriented universe, quite familiar and certain enough to be safely ignored, that the novel closes: 'Mr. Gorman looking straight before him, at nothing in particular, though the sky falling to the hills, and the hills falling to the plain, made as pretty a picture ... as a man could hope to meet with, in a day's march' (W,246).

Before the hero's appearance, and after his departure from the novel, universal harmony obtains -- at least superficially -- but the moment Watt shows his face our confidence is shaken. Where Murphy is immediately identified and set firmly in his surroundings (a mew in West Brompton): 'Here for what might have been six months he had eaten, drunk, slept, and put his clothes on and off' (M,5), Watt's identity is uncertain: 'Tetty was not sure whether it was a man or a woman. Mr. Hackett was not sure that it was not a parcel, a carpet for example, or a roll of tarpaulin' (W,14), and he is discovered in the process of 'setting out on a journey' (W,15). The hero of the novel clearly does not fit into the traditional setting in which Mr. Hackett is so

<sup>1</sup> cf. Murphy's 'The gentle rain was trying not to fall' (M,46)

evidently at ease; his brief impingement on the latter's consciousness raises a host of doubts and questions which disturb the more worldly characters long after his departure. As soon as he becomes the centre of attention, we are transferred to the appropriately transitional realm of the railway station. Here the reader continues to be more at home than the protagonist, finding, for example, the sight of a porter wheeling cans up and down less perplexing and in need of explanation than he does: 'He is sorting the cans, said Watt. Or perhaps it is a punishment for disobedience, or some neglect of duty' (W,24). In a world which continues to characterise in detail -- we know the name of the stationmaster, and are given a minute physical description of the newsagent together with his name and immediate future -- the haziness of Watt's identity and purpose are out of line.

Once Watt is on the train, however, the reader becomes distinctly uneasy. The compartment, although the narrative first indicates that 'It happened to be empty' (W,24), turns out to have a large man in it, so 'The compartment then was not so empty as Watt had at first supposed' (W,25).<sup>1</sup> In the carriage he hears strange voices singing. 'With these, if he was not familiar, he was

<sup>1</sup> This unstable reality has something akin to the dream world of Alice in Wonderland.

The influence of Lewis Carroll is even more strongly suggested later in the book, where Arthur's story contains echoes of the Madhatter's teaparty: 'Column of roots is very pretty too, I think, said Mr. de Baker. Yes, but not so pretty as column of cubes, said Mr. MacStern.... Mr. de Baker sang:

Said the column of cubes to the column of roots,  
Oh what will you have to drink?  
... (W,192).

not unfamiliar either. So he was not alarmed, unduly' (W,27); but the reader is bound to be exceedingly alarmed, being used to a world in which things are or are not empty, and the human voice cannot be completely disembodied. Of course these voices may be a figment of Watt's imagination, but the text does not say so and the possibility must be accepted that they are simply there, existing independently and inexplicably. The stability of the land Watt is leaving is underlined by the narrator's comment on the view from the train window: 'Now the fields flew by, the hedges and the ditches, ... or appeared to do so, for in reality it was the train that moved, across a land for ever still' (W,26), and the confidence with which he distinguishes between reality and illusion contrasts strongly with the uncertainty reigning in the carriage. When Watt leaves the train the qualities of the irrational Knott domain interfere increasingly with our understanding of reality, although the appearance of the worldly Lady McCann, with 'her traditions, catholic and military' (W,30), reminds us that we are still in no man's land. Here Watt's voices are substantial enough to form themselves into a choir, whose words are clearly audible.<sup>1</sup> And here the protagonist's relationship with the external world is clarified: it is oblivious of his presence -- 'he felt the moon pouring its

<sup>1</sup> The words, which decimalise the number of weeks in a leap year, represent an effort to conquer the effects of time by contemplating it under an ideal aspect, in the realm of mathematics; see Hugh Kenner, Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study, p.104. In the French text, however, the song is omitted, suggesting it belongs to Watt's inner world, still inaccessible to us, thus gaining in logic what is lost in symbolism; 'Quelle était la musique de ce thrène? Enigme,' reads the footnote, 'Quelle était, au moins celle chantée par le soprano? Mystère.' (W Fr., 35).

now whitening rays upon him, as though he were not there' (W,31) -- and he wants no part of it -- 'If there were two things that Watt disliked, one was the moon, and the other was the sun' (W,31), 'if there were two things that Watt loathed, one was the earth and the other was the sky' (W,34).

From the moment Mr. Knott's house comes into view the transition is accomplished, and we enter the novel's central region of perpetual change and irrationality, where reality evades the logical processes of the mind. From the start the simplest facts are elusive -- Watt cannot even tell how he manages to enter the house, and during the whole of his stay he never obtains certain knowledge about anything -- he does not know what happens, he fails to form a stable picture of Mr. Knott, and the very stairs 'were never the same ... even the number of steps seemed to vary' (W,80). At the heart of Watt's world, language, the mind's tool for grasping reality, loses its power. At its periphery, Mr. Hackett's meaning when he says 'his seat' (W,5) can be precisely explained, but inside Mr. Knott's house the reader is immediately faced with the anomaly of Arsene's 'short statement' (W,37) which is twenty-five pages long. In the realm of uncertainty and flux, 'The state in which Watt found himself resisted formulation in a way no state had ever done' (W,78), and the reader's ability to distinguish between reality and illusion is quickly impaired.

Enclosed in Mr. Knott's realm, placed with a nice sense of



symmetry between the two parts of Watt's sojourn, is the episode in the asylum, where the sense of alienation from social reality is most acute. The physical world appears as wild and barren, but its fences and aspens and hump-backed bridge have as much substance as the hump-backed Mr. Hackett's bench and walking stick. Traditional values are recalled to mind through being reversed: 'Birds of every kind abounded, and these it was our delight to pursue, with stones and clods of earth.... But our particular friends were the rats' (W,153). Watt even reverses his way of walking and his speech. Instability and illogicality are basic characteristics here too: the gardens vary from 'little' (W,151) to 'vast' (W,155); Watt and Sam manage to meet despite incompatible tastes in weather, although 'we never left our mansions ... unless at the call of the kind of weather we liked' (W,150); mysterious forces urge Sam towards Watt after they are parted; and inexplicable holes appear in the fences just when most needed. Their "mansions" recall Murphy's M.M.M., with its 'single rooms, or as some would say, cells, or as Boswell said, mansions' (M,116); while Murphy's mind, 'a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without' (M,76), is suggested by Sam's description of the monadic life 'in our windowlessness, in our bloodheat, in our hush' (W,150); but the attributes of the padded cell are equally relevant, and there is a place in the rational domain of Mr. Hackett for the padded cell, just as there was in Murphy's material world. Thus the asylum

makes an excellent centre for the novel's world since, by definition, it entails isolation from, and possibly intense opposition to, the world about it, while at the same time being capable of creating an impression of unity by its antithetical reference to the traditional world of social reality which formally circumscribes it but from which, logically, it is expressly excluded.

The journey through this strange world is not, in fact, quite symmetrical. The relatively solid region into which Watt emerges on leaving Mr. Knott's house is less reassuring -- at least to the reader -- than when he first left it. True, as the hero moves away he finds that 'his progress, though painful, and uncertain, was less painful, less uncertain, than he had apprehended, when setting out' (W,222), but the text does not permit him to catch the train back to the predictable region at the 'end of the line' (W,244). Although this is the physical territory in which, once Watt is gone, some semblance of familiarity returns to the world, while he is there all is uncertain: a figure approaching him on the road turns out to be possible hallucination, an empty waiting-room reveals itself (like the railway carriage) to be 'less empty than Watt had at first supposed' (W,233), and he himself disappears into thin air, meriting the description of 'the long wet dream with the hat and bags' (W,246). Watt still has difficulty relating language and reality, counting out 3/1d. at Mr. Nolan's request for 1/3d. trainfare, although the other characters seem untroubled. But the language by which the narrative is communicated to us shows elements of perversity:

'[The train] did not take up a single passenger, in the absence of Mrs. Pim. But it discharged a bicycle, for a Miss Walker' (W, 245) (my italics). The framework supporting the novel's fictional world totters slightly from the increased attacks of doubt in its closing pages. While its first support is securely set in the stable realm of Mr. Hackett, the balance is upset through the last support's failure to reach solid ground; the uncertain territory of no man's land in which the narrative ends undermines the whole structure.

Such a world cannot possibly support the solid framework expected in the conventional novel, with its projection of social reality. It needs to be accepted on its own terms. Attempts to force it into the mould of allegory or philosophical exposition detract from its richness and deny its ambiguity, and to categorise it as pure fantasy diminishes its comic content and unfairly refuses its claim to be a genuine, if unusual vision of the human condition. Whatever symbolic meanings we may choose to extract from the novel, first and foremost, as Anthony Cronin pleads: 'we are required to believe, and do, that there was a man called Watt, a poor man about whom we know very little, who went to work in the house of a Mr. Knott, [and] left in due course'.<sup>1</sup> This is precisely what an interesting early article on Watt<sup>2</sup> says we need

<sup>1</sup> A Question of Modernity (London 1966), p.98.

<sup>2</sup> 'Paradise of Indignity', TLS, 28th March 1958, p.168.

not do, only emphasising the symbolic truth of the vision of life expressed; but loss of the sense of physical and mental presence impoverishes the book by weakening its power to shock, bore, irritate and amuse, all of which depend on the conversion of ideas into imaginative experience -- one of the principal values of art. The symbolic level is, of course, important; it is impossible to overlook the parallel between the 'flux of forms' (M,79) in Murphy's mind and the continual metamorphoses in the Knott domain, particularly since both are referred to as 'the little world' (M,124, W,81), and the description of Watt as one 'who had come from without and whom the without would take again' (W,79) has undoubtedly allegoric overtones. But neither the modern philosopher nor the modern scientist would be prepared to dismiss as unrealistic this vision of life 'where little seems to make sense any longer and where it is painfully difficult to decide what is, or is not, truly known',<sup>1</sup> to quote Professor Fletcher. Beckett himself casts a mantle of doubt over the whole matter of symbolic interpretation in the final line of the Addenda: 'no symbols where none intended' (W,255), and the later French version is openly condemnatory: 'honni soit qui symboles y voit' (W [Fr.], 268).

### III. The Hero

As a hero, Watt has greater affinity with the shadowy, fluctuating being described by Nathalie Sarraute as the only honest picture possible for modern novelists: 'Un être sans

<sup>1</sup> Fletcher, Novels, p.55.



contours, indéfinissable, insaisissable et invisible',<sup>1</sup> exemplified in the French "Nouveaux Romans", than with the minutely characterised heroes of novels in the nineteenth-century tradition. Mr. Hackett, with his conventional approach to life, is deeply shocked at Watt's lack of 'Nationality, family, birth-place, confession, occupation, means of existence, [and] distinctive signs' (W,19). And, fittingly, the best description we receive applies to a number of Mr. Knott's past servingmen whom Watt resembles -- 'very much your height, breadth and width, that is to say big bony shabby seedy haggard knock-kneed men, with rotten teeth and big red noses' (W,57) -- so the characteristics in no way particularise him. Murphy is given some measure of fictional past and background -- he had been a theological student and has an uncle who supports him -- but Watt's only past is supplied in the self-conscious terms of the creative literary act which formed him, through reference to his prototype, Murphy: 'the stars, which he had once known familiarly by name, when dying in London' (W,212) (this, of course, could also refer to Beckett himself). He is permitted recollections of a fictional past, but their validity is obviously questionable and in any event they consist appropriately of hallucinations or absurdities, as, for instance, 'the time when his dead father appeared to him in a wood' (W,70), or 'the time when alone in a rowing-boat ... he suddenly smelt flowering currant' (W,70), which also hints at

<sup>1</sup> Nathalie Sarraute, L'Ère du soupçon (Paris, 1956), p.58.

his literary descendant in 'La fin'.<sup>1</sup> His one accomplishment, ironically, is that he is 'a very fair linguist' (W,208). This open admission that he belongs strictly to the fictional world gives Watt a freedom denied Kafka's K., even though K. shares his vagueness of background; he is what Professor Federman calls "heroic", 'in the sense of achieving fictional independence'.<sup>2</sup> He is bound by the rules of his own universe only, which the author makes no attempt to subject to ours.

Watt's structural role is a prerequisite of the novel's cohesion. As Professor Federman points out, he makes physical and symbolic links between characters as irreconcilable as Hackett, Sam and Knott. Mr. Hackett's hump is wished on him by the railway porter: 'The devil raise a hump on you' (W,22), and Mr. Nixon openly associates the two: 'when I see him, or think of him, I think of you, and ... when I see you, or think of you, I think of him' (W,17), he tells Hackett. Mr. Knott's idiosyncrasies include the choice of unmatched footwear, among which is a boot and a shoe -- Watt's standard attire, while Sam confuses their names: 'This refusal by Knott, I beg your pardon, by Watt ...' (W,113); and there is a strong inter-dependency in that Watt is Knott's witness and Knott is Watt's purpose. Sam momentarily sees Watt as a reflection of himself: 'suddenly I felt as though

<sup>1</sup> An early version of 'La fin' appeared under the title of 'Suite' in Les Temps Modernes, X (juillet 1946), 107-119, but without the boating episode (see Fletcher, Novels, p.96 n.1).

<sup>2</sup> Federman, p.95.

I were standing before a great mirror' (W,157), he says, as they face each other across the fence, and both he and Watt suffer from failing eyesight and hearing.

Watt is the only guarantee of temporal and spatial continuity. His particular functional achievement is somewhat similar to Celia's in Murphy, in that he establishes some form of contact between the incommensurate zones where the rational and irrational govern respectively, permitting their inclusion in a single fictional universe. Unlike Celia, however, his presence in both zones never blurs the novels outlines by suggesting that access may be achieved to each on the same level of experience. The social realism prevailing in Mr. Hackett's domain fails to give him any substance: 'But you must know something, said Mr. Hackett. One does not part with five shillings to a shadow.... I tell you nothing is known, cried Mr. Nixon' (W,19-20). His behaviour is incomprehensible to all who feel at home in the physical world: 'Perhaps he is off his head, said Mr. Hackett' (W,17), slyly encouraging the logical critic to see the hero's eventual residence as a lunatic asylum. The traditional characters, with whose viewpoint the close of the narrative is associated, accord more reality to his possessions than to him: 'Is it the long wet dream with the hat and bags? cried Mr. Nolan' (W,246). Thus, at the novel's perimeter, Watt's figure is hazy and insubstantial, surrounded by questions. He is in the rational zone, but obviously not of it, and, while there, stands in



unmistakable contrast to its solidity and predictability. In the irrational zone, on the other hand, this situation is reversed. In Mr. Knott's house, Watt is the most stable element, and he is the one being whose reality goes unquestioned -- all others are undermined by the suspicion that they are figments of Watt's imagination, resulting from his need to formulate his experience and organise it logically. By these means he acts as a kind of yardstick to measure the range of his fictional world, which, as Professor Federman observes, 'extends from trivial realism to the ultimate in absurdity'.<sup>1</sup> Where the world seems stable, Watt is a shadow, but where its reality becomes uncertain, Watt by contrast shows up with increased solidity.<sup>2</sup>

#### IV. Story

In a novel preoccupied with man's laborious efforts to conceive the world around him, a neatly formulated series of events would be out of place, being too sophisticated a contrivance to present itself as the authentic product of such a perplexed way of seeing. The story in Watt is therefore

<sup>1</sup> Federman, p.96.

<sup>2</sup> This suggests that, unlike Murphy, Watt is somewhat involved 'in the idealist tar' (M,76), and that for him the mental fact and the physical fact are not equally real. In Watt's experience, as for the later heroes, the only certain reality is found within the self -- hence his greater stability in comparison with the world about him once perception is channelled through his consciousness.



rudimentary: a man goes to work in another man's house; he works for a period on the ground-floor, for a period on the first-floor, and then leaves without ever learning anything about the place he worked in or the man he worked for. If the story raises any question in our minds, it is not "what happens next?" but "what is happening now?". The reality of events is absolutely without guarantee and any possibility which the story might have of creating an illusion of truth is deliberately destroyed. Emphasis is constantly placed on the 'fragility of the outer meaning' (W,70) and the instability of appearances. Events such as the Galls' visit or the telephone call, and descriptions as indeterminate as those of Watt's voices or Mr. Knott's physical appearance, heighten the impression that all statements must be seen as merely one among many possible interpretations. Indeed we are explicitly told that 'Watt made no secret of this, ... that many things described as happening ... perhaps never happened at all, or quite differently' (W,124). The narrative's validity is further jeopardised by the underlining of the narrator's role as selector and interpreter rather than creator: 'It is so difficult, with a long story like the story that Watt told, ... not to leave out some of the things that were told, and not to foist in other things that were never told' (W, 124-5). The story could thus just as well have been very different without in any way affecting its claim to be a true expression of Watt's experience (which was precisely that he did not know what was happening), and the temporary nature of its present formulation is emphasised by the

addition of the haphazard Addenda.

Events are all the more questionable for the protagonist's inability to distinguish between fact and fiction -- a logical result of the Cartesian dualism which isolates him, as a consciousness, from phenomena. In the course of the novel we are forced to witness the alteration in presentation of various story elements from hypothesis to fact. The logical need for a series of hungry dogs, cared for by successive generations of a needy family, to guarantee the consumption of Mr. Knott's left-overs presses so hard on Watt that his account progresses from 'very likely very soon a real live famished dog ... was coming ... to Mr. Knott's back door, led by ... an unmistakable specimen of local indigent proliferation' (W,97), to 'The name of this fortunate family was Lynch' (W,98), and is swiftly absorbed into the body of the story: 'This little matter of the food and the dog, Watt pieced it together from the remarks let fall ... by the twin dwarfs Art and Con. For it was they who led the famished dog, every evening, to the door' (W,109). The haziness of the line of demarcation between mental and physical facts is comically emphasised by the narrator's comment on the comparison of Erskine's running from floor to floor with certain fish who, 'in order to support the middle depths, are forced to rise and fall, now to the surface of the waves and now to the ocean bed. But do such fish exist? Yes, such fish exist, now' (W,118). It is fitting that 'of all the things Watt ever saw

or heard, during his stay in Mr. Knott's establishment, he heard none so well, saw none so clear, as Arthur and Mr. Graves that sunny afternoon ... and Louit, and Mr. Nackybal and Mr. O'Meldon ... and all the things they did, and the words they said' (W;197), where Louit and Mr. Nackybal belong to the sub-fictional realm of Arthur's story and yet are accorded the same degree of reality by Watt as their creator. A story is made of words and is much easier to grasp, since the question of its relation to phenomena does not arise to confuse the issue; so the most positively presented moment of Watt's story dramatises the novel's philosophical thesis, that the human mind is better constructed for the conception of fiction than of reality.

The inherent falseness of any version of events is part of the novel's subject-matter, so that the undermining of its own version, and the widespread offering of alternatives equally valid if equally false, concur with the hero's experience of life as a vain struggle to apprehend reality. Unlike Murphy, where the author's efforts were devoted to the debunking of an elaborate story edifice, in Watt events are so uncertain that he gives us, through Arsene, an outline of what lies ahead for the protagonist -- 'And then another night fall and another man come and Watt go' (W,56) -- at the start of Watt's visit. Arsene's summary is required, not to detract from the story's excitement, but to give it a semblance of objective reality which Watt's subjective account fails to accord it.



The plotting of a novel entails the emphasising of the pattern of events so that a clear picture emerges of their inter-relationship, and a sense of inevitability is developed concerning their outcome. However, events in Watt are surrounded by so many questions, both explicit and implicit, that their strength to unite in a meaningful design is sapped. The initial impression of ordered life gradually yields to the suggestion that its apparent logic is simply the product of Watt's mind which rationalises all material entering the field of consciousness. As the novel progresses, the hero's obsession with order and the tendency of his mind to organise things into series, thereby conferring on them a formal justification for being where and how they are as and when they are, is increasingly in evidence.<sup>1</sup> He even decides that the picture in Erskine's room is 'a term in a series, like the series of Mr. Knott's dogs, or the series of Mr. Knott's men, or like the centuries that fall, from the pod of eternity' (W,129); and this inclination is highlighted by being carried to absurd lengths in the organisation of the

<sup>1</sup> Watt is here shrinking from 'the cruelties and enchantments of reality' (Pr,22) from which Habit, says Beckett in Proust, hides us; 'But when the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and then only may it be a source of enchantment' (Pr,22-23) -- and the measure of Beckett's increased pessimism between the writing of Proust and Molloy is apparent from the increase in cruelty and the decrease in enchantment of the reality feared by Watt and Moran and accepted ruefully by Molloy.



haphazard croaking of frogs, irrelevantly recalled from 'a distant summer night' (W,135), into an orderly system. It is true that Arsene is first responsible for the notion of the series of servingmen in Mr. Knott's house which justifies ("motivates" would be too strong a word) Watt's coming and makes his departure inevitable, thus affording a plot of sorts to the novel. However, when Arsene's propensity for establishing series -- 'Consider for example the increeping and out-bouncing house-and parlour-maids' (W,49) -- is recalled, and when it is realised that his statement is not received directly from an omniscient narrator, as we at first suppose, but is in fact Sam's version of Watt's highly dubious and halting account, it becomes impossible to overlook the strong likelihood that the series which determines Watt's coming to, moving up a floor in, and departure from, Mr. Knott's house is the fruit of his own logic-oriented mind and has no basis in outer reality. Thus, once again, the pattern which shapes and relates events is revealed by Beckett as an arbitrary imposition, as in Murphy; only here it is not a self-proclaimed omniscient narrator who is responsible, but the protagonist himself. Events are inconceivable for Watt unless they conform to some pattern or logic; in his narrative, therefore, plot is admittedly arbitrary, but paradoxically it is nonetheless essential, at least in elementary form, if he is to conceive and relate anything at all. Since Murphy plays no part in the telling of his own story, the plot of Beckett's first novel lacks the ambivalence and complex significance

of this second one. Watt's narrator makes amusing indirect reference to the paradoxical nature of the book's plot when he remarks on the subject of the series of servingmen: 'it is rare that the feeling of absurdity is not followed by the feeling of necessity', and conversely: 'it is rare that the feeling of necessity is not followed by the feeling of absurdity' (W,131).

The question of plot, if we consider it in terms of E. M. Forster's definition: 'a narrative of events, the emphasis falling on causality',<sup>1</sup> is consciously examined, at least by implication, in the body of the text. In discussing the philosophical problems involved in Watt, Professor Coe describes the protagonist as 'torn between two conflicting awarenesses: the one, of the arbitrary and illogical character of events as such; the other, of the inescapable framework of logic which is imposed on these events as soon as they are formulated in words'.<sup>2</sup> This conflict is directly reflected in Watt's pondering on the pattern he has imposed on events: 'In this long chain of consistence ... the notion of the arbitrary could only survive as the notion of a pre-established arbitrary' (W,132). This leads him on to consideration of the purely formal nature of the relationship between events, which implies that the novel's plot is denied dynamic causality. Watt considers that the links between 'any three or four servants, Tom, Dick, Harry and another' (W,132), are completely static and formal: 'Tom's two years on the first-floor are not

<sup>1</sup> Aspects of the Novel, p.116.

<sup>2</sup> Coe, p.49.

because of Dick's two years on the ground-floor ... and Dick's two years on the ground-floor are not because of Tom's two years on the first-floor ... [but] because Tom is Tom, and Dick Dick, ...' (W,132-3). In a dynamic relationship 'there would have been a languor, and a fever, the languor of the task done but not ended, the fever of the task ended but not done' (W,133); but Watt's coming and going was undertaken with no sense of interdependence: 'Mr. Knott was haven, calmly entered, freely ridden, gladly left' (W,133).<sup>1</sup> Watt does not come because Arsene is leaving, nor go because Micks has arrived, he simply completes a logical, symmetrical design - logical but neither meaningful nor necessary. Thus the application of the term "plot" to this narrative, with its overtones of purposeful manipulation, no longer seems very appropriate, and the more superficial concept, "pattern of events", proves more acceptable. This long consideration of the nature of the novel's pattern of events further disorients the reader, who tends to assume dynamic causality -- his expectations being formed by the

<sup>1</sup> Clearly Watt is closer to the creative consciousness than was Belacqua, whom the narrator of 'Love and Lethe' dissociates from attempts to plot his story: 'For we assume the irresponsibility of Belacqua, his faculty for acting with insufficient motivation [being] no longer a matter for surprise' (MPK,122). His following comment -- 'A mental home was the place for him' (MPK,123) -- becomes highly ironic in the light of the more responsible Watt's failure to imbue recalcitrant events with causation, and his eventual recourse to a (possibly) lunatic asylum.

traditional novel. The five pages of plot-rationalisation, followed by the absurd organisation of the croaking frogs, leaves him in no doubt as to the lack of foundation for his assumptions.

#### VI. Narrative Movement

The novel's movement, like the picture in Erskine's room, develops in an incomplete circle. Watt never does, in fact, appear back in Mr. Hackett's region, we only follow him back as far as the railway station. The central point of the book, Watt and Sam in their mansions, is dislocated in time and space as is the picture's centre: 'Watt wondered how long it would be before the point and circle entered together upon the same plane' (W,127). The story, insofar as it adheres to Watt's viewpoint, starts and ends in a railway station. Watt falls when he comes in and falls again just before he leaves. It is night-time, 'The moon was now up' (W,28), when he gets off the train, and again when he returns to the station after his stay with Mr. Knott: 'The signal-man ... was waiting in his box, as he did every night' (W,227). As Watt approaches Mr. Knott's house he is overcome by a feeling of weakness, which recurs as he eventually walks down the same road away from the house. This apparently circular form does not, however, bear close examination. The "consternation behind the form" is not hard to find. For one thing, the book's symmetrical appearance is obtained through the intentionally obvious device of seriously distorting temporal, spatial and logical sequence. From all these points of view the section concerning



Sam and Watt should have closed -- or opened, since it is retrospective narration -- the novel, instead of coming in the middle. This despotic behaviour on the part of the narrator eliminates the possibility of the book's being taken as based upon a balanced, solid foundation. Then, if we are exacting in our quest for symmetry, we find that, strictly speaking, the parallel given for the novel's introduction via Mr. Hackett's traditional world is the chaos of fictional scraps found in the Addenda; the book thus begins in exemplary if illusory order and ends up in utter disorder. A moment's reflexion shows that the balancing railway-station scenes do not in fact take place at the same station; and this, of course, highlights the most serious omission from the seeming return journey -- the train journey itself. Any expectation the pattern of events may arouse of Watt's ending up back in Mr. Hackett's world, where we first meet him although not where he necessarily belongs, shows itself, after even the most cursory investigation, to be based on illusion.<sup>1</sup> This deceptive quality supports Ruby Cohn's claim that 'in the form of Watt ... there is insistence upon the ambiguous nature of experience'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> David Hesla considers that each chapter returns to its starting point, although it disintegrates within, seeing Arsene as digressing from his subject, Mr. Knott, Watt digressing to the Lynch family and then Louit's story, and finally "the fiasco" of the railway-station scene (*The Shape of Chaos: A Reading of Beckett's Watt*, pp.102-3). However, Arsene's subject is not Knott but his own experience, the chainlike forward movement inside Knott's house prevents each section forming a closed circle, and it seems in no way possible to force the station episode into such a rigid circular pattern. On analysis, the satisfying thesis that each chapter reflects the novel's overall circular structure (itself doubtful), with the void of Mr. Knott at its heart, is not really acceptable.

<sup>2</sup> 'Watt in the Light of The Castle', p.157.

The possibility of a second turn of the circle vaguely intimated in Murphy proves to be far less likely here, where the circle is broken and forced into shape, ready to spring apart at the slightest opportunity and collapse altogether. The strongest suggestion of the repetition inherent in the circular form comes early in the narrative, before Watt leaves the train and before our confidence in the predictability of this fictional world is shaken, in the hint that he has made this journey before: 'Watt had once been carried past this station, and on to the next, through his not having prepared himself in time, to get down' (W,28). But, since we do not see him returning to social reality this time, we are not encouraged to visualise this as a round trip, endlessly repeated. Implications of the cyclical nature of time are, however, considered in the abstract: 'But if [the period of service on each floor] was more than one year then there was a surfeit, seasons passing, or a season, ... twice through the beams the shadows of the service of Mr. Knott, a fragment of rigmorole re-read. For the new year says nothing new, to the man fixed in space' (W,131).

## VII. Narrative Control

As in Murphy, Watt's narrator makes it abundantly clear that the scope of the novel's material is pre-established and at his disposal from the beginning, and that the general pattern of events is already settled. On Watt's entry into Mr. Knott's house Arsene gives him a rough outline of his stay and predicts

his eventual departure, even telling him, truly as it happens, that he will not do the same for his successor. Watt himself foresees his departure when he thinks of himself as one who 'had come from without and whom the without would take again' (W,79). The temporal end of the story, where Sam discovers Watt walking backwards in his garden, is referred to at the outset when the narrator comments on Watt's sitting with his back to the engine: 'Already Watt preferred to have his back to his destination' (W,25). And Watt's eccentric manner of speech from the same period is twice revealed before it actually occurs in the text: reference is made to 'the obscurity of Watt's communications, the rapidity of his utterance and the eccentricities of his syntax, as elsewhere recorded' (W,72), and to his manner of pronouncing a tenth-rate Xenium: 'Spoken as he spoke it, back to front, it had a certain air' (W,130). Such foresights constitute the reader's only guarantee that, despite appearances, the author is in control of his fiction, and knows the general direction which his narrative must take. There is no question here of over-emphasising the writer's power to dictate events, as was the case in Murphy; on the contrary, Watt seems so disorganised that the few landmarks it contains need every form of spotlighting they can get. The eventual revelation that the narrative is retrospective does not give its customary assurance of objective truth, but rather suggests that it is chosen as a mode of organising after the event (symbolised in Watt's advancing

backwards at the asylum), where the experience depicted is so uncontrollable as to evade immediate formulation. Organisation is thus imposed, not inherent, but for a specific purpose: to gain intellectual control over experience.

This narrator is extremely demanding of his reader and refers back and forth in the textual sequence in a manner that suggests that fictional time is a two-way process which can be reversed at will. 'Has Kate come?' (W,82), asks Erskine, referring to the dog who only becomes a named reality twenty-eight pages later; but it is carefully, if confusingly, pointed out that 'this was much later' (W,82). The apparently spontaneous and completely illogical introduction of Watt's affair with the fishwoman, Mrs. Gorman, inserted well on in the narrative, is referred to seventy-one pages earlier: 'Or was there perhaps some light for Watt ... in such relations as those with Mr. Graves, or with the fishwoman, that he left unspoken' (W,66). And indeed this reference clearly serves as the source of the association of ideas which causes the episode of Mrs. Gorman to be immediately followed by a discussion of Watt's relations with Mr. Graves. In this the narrator follows his own early recommendation: 'In particular the appearance of the gardener, a Mr. Graves, at the back door, twice and even three times every day, should be gone into with the utmost care' (W,66), and follows it so meticulously that the later passage, with startling lack of explanation, begins contradictorily: 'Mr. Graves came to the back door four times a day' (W,141). Mr. Nackybal's mathematical



facility, exhibited in Arthur's immensely long story (W,169-196), appears for comparative purposes much earlier in the narrative: 'There were times when Watt could reason ... almost as rapidly as Mr. Nackybal' (W,129) -- a comparison which also indicates that ultimately both belong to the domain of fiction. The narrator makes an unexpected leap, for which he can hardly claim to have prepared us, from the description of Watt getting into Erskine's room to the moment of his relating the event: 'Ruse a by, he said, and as he said, Ruse a by, he blushed' (W,126); unless the reader has paid close attention to the first reference to Watt's manner of relating his story, the jump which follows will be utterly bewildering, and he will have to wait for the impending second reference to be enlightened. In the main, these anticipatory remarks are clearly intended to disconcert; they confuse rather than clarify things for the reader, since they are unjustified by their context and far too distant from the matters to which they refer to be related to them by any but the most observant readers. If anything, we are encouraged to see even more chaos and capriciousness in the narrative content and sequence than is literally justified. They convey an impression of carelessness supporting the author's claim to 'fatigue and disgust' (W,247) with his work.

#### VIII. Selection of Narrative Material

The absence of any real plot in Watt poses the problem of the need for some sort of guide-line for the selection of material.

The question was already raised marginally in Murphy, but here it is of fundamental importance since Watt's inability to formulate his experience precludes even the crude justification of a thing's having been or having happened as a basis for its incorporation, quite apart from any notion of intrinsic interest. Murphy's content was largely confined to the surface reality of its world (except for Chapter VI), a hotchpotch of matters revealing the absence of a standard of values. Watt's content, on the other hand, is bound by the mental realm, and the less it is associated with surface reality the more it proliferates. Since, for Watt, the externals of Mr. Knott's establishment increasingly evade the mind, the narrative is more and more given over to logical mental processes -- hypotheses, series, permutations -- given in full owing to the hero's incapacity to ascertain their accuracy in terms of phenomena. These processes have a mental reality, as have the absurdly unrealistic sub-fictions, Arsene's and Mr. de Baker's doggerel,<sup>1</sup> and the occasional jokes -- being extended forms of word-play, all having their existence confined to linguistic structures which belong to the mental realm only. It might even be claimed that the inclusion of all these elements is even more justified than that of so-called events whose reality is far less assured. The narrator's comic remarks on Watt's mysterious entry into Mr. Knott's house are not perhaps quite the irrelevancy they seem at first: 'And if the back door had never opened, but remained shut, then who knows Watt had never got into

<sup>1</sup> The original Olympia Press edition of Watt contained additional material -- two short pieces of verse and a brief tale about a duck in Arsene's speech, and a piece of music in the Addenda -- subsequently deleted by the author (information supplied by the publisher).

Mr. Knott's house at all, but turned away, and returned to the station ... Unless he had got in through a window' (W,35). And it is surely fitting that the section of the narrative dealing with Watt's stay on the first-floor, the most elusive part of his experience, should be taken up with Arthur's story, and a series of permutations and combinations concerning Mr. Knott's habits and appearance so inclusive as to give no certain information regarding him at all, and so eccentric as to seem more likely to have originated in Watt's mind than in the externality of the Knott domain. Christine Brooke-Rose holds that the hero strictly limits his consideration of phenomena to those of immediate concern, a device which she compares to an animal's means of avoiding confusion,<sup>1</sup> but this seems more appropriate to Molloy than to Watt since the former is more confined to the experiential plane than the latter. Watt's selective process is more closely related to the intellect. If one considers the main objects of his experience treated by the narrative -- Mr. Knott's food, the dog and its minders, Erskine's picture, the contacts with Mr. Graves, Mr. Knott's habits -- they can scarcely be called complex, and it can reasonably be assumed that it is their very simplicity that permits their selection for detailed recounting, since the more involved matters are beyond formulation. Even such relatively trivial matters as the Galls' visit, how

<sup>1</sup> 'Samuel Beckett and the Anti-novel', London Magazine, V,12 (December 1958), 40.

Erskine related to the bell heard at night, and the laws governing the coming and going of servingmen, raise enormous difficulties in Watt's mind. Indeed, if anything of moment actually occurred, its inclusion in the novel might well justify a severe reprimand for inconsistency. Ease of formulation by a mind alienated from matter would appear to be the main criterion for selection of the novel's material. Story and plot, whose needs direct selection in the traditional novel, are virtually irrelevant from this point of view in Watt; not they, but the basic situation of a mind striving to conceive is the central preoccupation here -- its efforts to put reality into words and its relaxation in fiction and abstraction; and it is to meet the demands of this basic situation that the principle of selection is geared.

#### IX. Narrative Organisation

Logical mental processes act as an organising principle of major importance in Watt, where story, with its subservience to time, is of so little account. Watt's experience is treated in terms of "what happened in this or that area?", rather than "what happened next?". Thus, in the area of events, the Galls' visit is given as an example, without any inherent significance, typical of those incidents in which 'nothing had happened, ... a nothing had happened' (W,77). The difficulty experienced in formulating this event logically leads to the trouble Watt has in putting a name to anything; and once this matter is dealt



with the narrator can pass on to another area of experience -- Mr. Knott's sleeping habits. These naturally lead to his eating habits which raise the problem of his leftovers which, in turn, justify the introduction of the dog, which leads to description of the multitudinous family responsible for her care. All these matters, if highly improbably from the point of view of social realism, are, logically, perfectly acceptable as a sequence of mental preoccupations. Considered in this light, the placing of the meeting between Sam and Watt at the end of the first part of Watt's period of service is most appropriate, since it is used to explain the scantiness of facts at the narrator's disposal for the next part -- a point which has clearly bothered him, to judge from his remark in the Addenda: 'Watt learned to accept etc. Use to explain poverty of Part III' (W,248).

Frequently there appears to be no particular reason for passing on to one area of experience as opposed to another, for instance the shift from Watt's difficulties with language to Mr. Knott's sleeping habits, mentioned above. Sometimes, of course, apparent non sequiturs are accounted for by an obscure association of ideas which the reader may fail to follow, as the leap from the fishwoman to the gardener (W,141) based on a casual remark on page 66, or the transition from the series of servingmen to a memory of three frogs croaking, where the fact that the croaks are arbitrarily forced into related series, as are the movements of the servingmen, is not specifically stated. The passage from

the frogs to the fishwoman is even more debatable. The text only offers the tenuous association of Watt's thoughts in the ditch when he hears the frogs -- 'wondering if it was the time and the place and the loved one already' (W,135) -- and the fishwoman's ability to "please him greatly". The references are not to the same woman, since Watt's meetings with Mrs. Gorman always took place in his kitchen and presumably at a later period in his life. Accordingly, if the underlying thought-sequence is logical, it must entail the transfer of the epithet "loved one" to Mrs. Gorman, a truly grotesque application which foreshadows Molloy's terminology in his Ruth/Edith relationship. Apparent whimsy in the narrative sequence may, of course, simply be due to the fact that the narrator omits the train of thought leading to a change of subject. It may be the emphasis on change in the description of Mr. Knott's ever-varying footwear that turns Sam's (or is it Watt's?) thoughts towards his own constantly changing self, and brings about the sudden outburst:

To think, when one is no longer young, when one is not yet old, that one is no longer young, that one is not yet old, that is perhaps something. To pause, towards the close of one's three-hour day, and consider: ... (W,201).<sup>1</sup>

But no effort is made to smooth the transition or indicate the relationship, and the result is interruption rather than continuity. Whether due to caprice or logic, the fact remains that the order of the narrative does not depend on the chronology of

<sup>1</sup> This passage is one of the most lyrical expressions of the theme of middle age in the novel, supporting Lawrence Harvey's view of the book as dealing with the middle years of man.

the story, nor its distortion in the interests of plot, but on the order in which matters pass through the narrator's mind.<sup>1</sup>

#### X. The Time Factor

In the sense that the order of the narrative reflects the thought-sequence of the creative consciousness, time may still be said to be a controlling factor in Watt, the dominant time being that of the narrator rather than that of his characters. Where Sterne, in Tristram Shandy, was intent upon bringing his narrator's stream-of-consciousness to the fore, Beckett's intentions are not nearly so straightforward. For one thing, responsibility for the narrative order is never clearly allocated, so that we cannot tell for certain how much represents Watt's chain of thought, how much Sam's and how much Beckett's own. This ambiguity prevents the time-scale of the creative consciousness from playing an active role in this novel -- a problem overcome in its successors through switching to full-time use of the first person. Indeed there is a curious lack of temporal awareness here, which is in keeping with the novel's scholastic, pedantic style, and adds to the impression of chaos since the form of temporal continuity which organises the material is kept so much in the background. Professor Fletcher is of the opinion that Watt is 'clearly a somewhat uncertain and transitional composition',<sup>2</sup> and from this point of view perhaps he is right.

<sup>1</sup> This is precisely the organising method of Tristram Shandy, a point which supports the suggested influence of Sterne already remarked on.

<sup>2</sup> Fletcher, Novels, p.87.

In Murphy the dominance of fictional time resulted in light-hearted parody, and from Molloy on, where the narrator's time prevails, the novels have a quality of dramatic immediacy denied Watt because of its paradigmatic elements and inconspicuous temporal order. This 'extended doodle in words',<sup>1</sup> as Professor Fletcher calls it, can easily be seen as a kind of game, as later played by the tramps in En attendant Godot, to fill the hollow of suspended time.<sup>2</sup> In any event, although the organising time factor in Watt relates to the moment of the novel's creation rather than the moment it represents, the reader's awareness of the temporal level is remarkably obtuse.

One of the rare moments when the fact that the time-scale is that of the creative consciousness is brought sharply to our notice is when the intrusive interior monologue — discussed above in terms of logical continuity — breaks in on the description of Mr. Knott's apparel. This is partly because the hiatus in the thought process heightens our awareness of the temporal continuity at the creative level, the relation of the passage to the middle-aged narrator being the only possible explanation for its presence. The acuteness of the moment must, however, also be connected with the fact that for once ambiguity of origin is virtually overcome, at least for the observant reader. Comparison

<sup>1</sup> Fletcher, Novels, p.87.

<sup>2</sup> The aura of timelessness in the book may well be a reaction to the circumstances in which it was written -- in the Vaucluse between 1942 and 1944, when Beckett was in hiding from the Gestapo, cut off from the world, where time must have seemed to stretch before him endlessly and emptily.



with an earlier passage: 'To be together again, after so long, who love the sunny wind, the windy sun, in the sun, in the wind, that is perhaps something' (W,162), clearly attributed to Sam, points to him in his capacity as narrator as origin of the problematic, impassioned outburst ('To think, when one is no longer young ...'). It is interesting that Niall Montgomery should have picked out this passage as one of outstanding poetic quality;<sup>1</sup> there are several similar moments in the book, but undoubtedly this one has a certain lyricism denied the others because the consciousness responsible for it is clearly indicated. The striking immediacy of the passage, and the force with which the realisation of the temporal plane involved hits us, are all the more noticeable because of the prevailing timelessness of the novel.

While time on the creative level quietly controls the narrative sequence, fictional time also has its structural role, a complex and deceptive one. Because of the pervading uncertainty, "life by values" is a meaningless concept here (indicating a reduction of hope since the writing of Murphy), and is replaced by "life in the mind" which is as atemporal in Watt as it was in the earlier novel. Thus the pages of lists and hypotheses and permutations are completely unrelated to the passing of time -- and since they constitute the main body of the work, its feeble sense of time is understandable. "Life by the clock" is mainly seen in terms of the natural temporal divisions -- night and

<sup>1</sup> 'No Symbols where None Intended', New World Writing, Fifth Mentor Selection, (New York, April 1954), p.331.

day, summer and winter -- whose cyclical nature indicates the passage of time with a certain vagueness and no sense of urgency. At the novel's stable periphery, Mr. Hackett is met watching 'the long greens and yellows of the summer evening' (W,7), and we are able to follow that night through to the coming of dawn, when a precise moment on the clock, 9.a.m., can be expected if not actually witnessed: 'it was not yet day again already in the kitchen. But that would come ... until getting on to 9 a.m. all the gold and white and blue would fill the kitchen' (W,63). Thus temporal continuity is established between Mr. Hackett's region and the elusive Knott domain. The same general terms indicate the time of his departure: 'As Watt came, so he went, in the night ... It was summer, he thought, because the air was not quite cold' (W,214). And here too the chronology is upheld in the outer world and we are brought through the night to 'the early morning light' (W,246) of the railway station where the story ends. Society's time-scale, with its identifying function, is by this time completely inapplicable, however; and, although the five-fifty-seven train is expected from the south-east and the six-six from the north-west, 'not many minutes later the six-four entered the station' (W,245).

Within this familiar temporal framework, however, all is not quite as it seems. In Mr. Knott's house, time is an enigma. The only indications by which its passage can be approximately measured are given in the absurd account of the Lynch family and the line of dogs in its care: 'Watt had not been four months

with Mr. Knott when Liz ... expelled a child' (W,102), and shortly after died; then: 'two months had not passed, since the death of Liz, when ... Ann retired to the privacy of her room and gave birth' (W,103); 'Then some four months later, when winter seemed safely past, ... the brothers Joe, Bill and Jim ... in the short space of one week were carried off' (W,106-7). And to help us calculate the length of Watt's stay on the ground floor, we know that the dog in service when Watt arrived was called Kate, and 'Kate died while Watt was still on the ground-floor, and was replaced by a dog called Cis' (W,110), and 'Cis was still alive when Watt left the ground-floor' (W,111). None of this is really very helpful, but at least it seems to point to the temporal nature of the Knott domain -- until we remember that the Lynch family and the dogs have their origin in Watt's mind and not in the outside world. Watt himself can only measure events in terms of his arrival or transfer to the first-floor: The Galls' visit 'took place shortly after Watt's arrival' (W,67), and 'One day towards the end of Watt's stay on the ground-floor, the telephone rang' (W,146). Although the question of time troubles him, 'Watt's feeling on this matter was that he would serve Mr. Knott for one year on the ground-floor, and then for another year on the first-floor' (W,130). Ultimately, 'as it turned out, Watt was never to know how long he spent in Mr. Knott's house' (W,134). The narrator assures us that 'time, as time will, drew on' (W,145), but the passing moments are anonymous, so their motion cannot be perceived; Watt moved upstairs 'when the yew

was 'dark green, almost black' (W,147) -- as Pozzo will later say: 'Un jour pareil aux autres'.<sup>1</sup> The identification of Knott's domain with the "little world of the mind" is encouraged by the timeless aura surrounding it, and the suggestion that Watt's experience there is atemporal must be seen in the account of his departure from Mr. Knott's house, when we are told that 'He was overtaken, in the road, by the passing weakness already mentioned' (W,222), since this earlier mention is made before Watt enters Knott's house at all: 'But he had not continued very far when, feeling weak, he left the crown of the road' (W,31). This ambiguous reference implies that Watt experiences the Knott realm outside time, and the illusory nature of the experience is further hinted at by the fact that it is only after the first mention of his weakness that 'the chimneys of Mr. Knott's house were visible at last' (W,34), and that after the second mention, when he has recovered, 'the chimneys of Mr. Knott's house were not visible, in spite of the excellent visibility' (W,224). The level of interpretation which sees Watt's adventure as an investigation of the reality of the world and self, resulting in the experience of nothingness, is thus allowed for in temporal terms,

<sup>1</sup> This unidentified time is two-faced, it can limp along or race by, as the continuation of Pozzo's speech makes clear: 'un jour je suis devenu aveugle, un jour nous deviendrons sourds, un jour nous sommes nés, un jour nous mourrons, le même jour, le même instant' (G,154), throwing new light on the problem of the rapidly decaying bodies of Beckett's later heroes. Indeed, Watt is not exempt either if we think of the rapid disposal of members of the Lynch clan, or the fact that both Sam and Watt deteriorate: 'For my own hearing now began to fail, though my myopia remained stationary' (W,167), 'But what kind of a witness was Watt, weak now of eye, hard of hearing, and with even the more intimate senses greatly below par?' (W,202).



since within the Knott realm reigns the atemporality of the void.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to its normal cohesive function, fictional time in Watt frequently acts as a disruptive force. It is constantly being undermined; the reader is encouraged to feel he has found his bearing, only to have his confidence gradually sapped or to be suddenly disorientated. Even in the more traditional regions, unexpected gaps occur in the temporal sequence. Mr. Hackett's examination of the couple sitting on "his" bench: 'Taking a pace forward, to satisfy himself that the gentleman's other hand was not going to waste, Mr. Hackett was shocked to find it limply dangling over the back of the seat ...', jumps to: 'I see no indecency, said the policeman' (W,6); and time plays a little game with space in the closing stages as Mr. Nolan finds the waiting-room door blocked because Watt

swaying, murmuring, was nearer the waiting-room door than the waiting-room door was wide.

Mr. Nolan found Mr. Gorman on his doorstep, taking leave of his mother.

Now I am at liberty, said Watt, I am free ...(W,237).

Such lacunae emphasise the fictional nature of the material, just

<sup>1</sup> Watt's venture into the inner world entails a rejection of the world of surfaces but not of all that is not self. His is not the self-examination of the Unnamable. True he is 'in his midst at last' (W,39), as Arsene puts it, but it is here that the surfaces of the outer world are peeled away to reach the Essence of things. 'Mais il était peut-être temps que l'objet se retirât ... du monde dit visible', Beckett tells us in 'La peinture des Van Velde', p.352 (written in 1945, i.e. shortly after Watt); reality lies in the atemporal Idea of things: 'La chose immobile dans le vide, voilà enfin la chose visible, l'objet pur.... La boîte crânienne a le monopole de cet article' (p.352). Of an event so experienced Arsene says: 'To conclude from this that the incident was internal would, I think, be rash. For my ... personal system was so distended ... that the distinction between what was inside it and what was outside it was not at all easy to draw' (W,41-42).

as similar devices did in Murphy, by directing our attention to the omniscient, omnipotent narrator in his function as originator of the time-scheme.

Within the Knott domain, temporal references, interstices between successive attempts at intellection, are extremely confusing. The "nows" and "thens" which purport to introduce specific moments are as unidentifiable as the "one days" which are scattered through the text. Fiction within fiction is presented in the same terms as pseudo-reality. Thus the same past tense covers the relatively recent and realistic meeting between Sam and Watt, introduced in ambiguous temporal terms -- 'It was about this time that Watt was transferred to another pavilion' (W,149) -- as presents Watt's stay in Mr. Knott's house which is chronologically earlier and less entitled to claims to truth. The same tense serves for Arthur's story<sup>1</sup> -- 'But now Mr. Nackybal, having obtained a temporary relief, brought out ... his right hand from under his skirt' (W,181) -- and Arthur's interruptions in his tale parallel Sam's in the narrative and neatly comment on the inclusive style of both: 'To this for all reply Louit reached with his right hand ... If I tell you all this in such detail, Mr. Graves, the reason is ... that I cannot, much as I should like, and for reasons that I shall not go in to, for they are unknown to me, do otherwise' (W,180). In the account of Watt's efforts to get into Erskine's room, no distinction is made between 'Then Watt said, Obscure keys may

<sup>1</sup> The French translation uses the Past Definite in all cases, where, if desired, distinctions could easily be made through use of the Past Indefinite.

open simple locks, but simple keys obscure locks never' (W,122)<sup>1</sup> and 'Ruse a by, he said' (W,126), although two temporal levels are indicated, the second being an intrusive moment from the asylum. The relation of Watt's first-floor experiences leaps forward to the moment of his departure - 'But he was no sooner in the public road than he burst into tears' (W,207-8) -- and back again to Knott's house -- 'Watt's room contained no information' (W,208); then another moment from the asylum episode (now past in the narrative) intrudes: 'Continuing then, when he had told me this, then he loosed my hands from his shoulders...' (W,213), bringing the account of the first-floor period to a close, and we suddenly realise that the whole of Watt's ineffable experience in close contact with Mr. Knott is framed in the temporal scheme of the asylum. This progressive undermining of the value of the past tense leads one to doubt, in retrospect if not at the time of reading, the temporal value of the account of Watt's affair with the fishwoman, which is so unexpected and uncharacteristic of "events" in the irrational zone. Although it is related in the same manner as dealings with Mr. Graves -- 'Mrs. Gorman called every Thursday' (W,138), 'Mr. Graves came to the back door four times a day' (W,141) -- and both relationships are associated in the earlier reference, we are specifically told that 'On only one occasion ... was the threshold crossed by a stranger' (W,67), and this refers to the Galls' visit. Thus, in the Knott domain, ambiguity of tense serves to upset the reader's chronological

<sup>1</sup> The use of "obscure" suggests a hidden warning to exegetists here, like the closing 'no symbols where none intended' (W,255).

sense as well as his ability to distinguish between illusion and reality.

While the blanket use of the past tense confuses several temporal planes, unexpected alterations in temporal perspective are equally disconcerting, if less destructive from an epistemological angle. Indicative of narrative dexterity, where the former technique suggests uncertainty, these switches in viewpoint are confined to the earlier part of the novel, while failures to distinguish between different moments in time mainly occur later on. Only an omniscient narrator can look into the future and remark, as Watt sets out on his journey: 'And it will be a long time now before Watt smiles again' (W,25). Later, when his omniscience becomes questionable, truth is guaranteed by reference to Watt, and the whole narrative momentarily shifts back in time to give a panoramic view which bolsters its authenticity: 'But he assured me at the time, when he began to spin his yarn, that he would tell all, and then again, some years later, when he had spun his yarn, that he had told all. And as I believed him then and then again, so I continued to believe him, long after the yarn was spun, and Watt gone' (W,123-4). The narrator's chronological awareness is clear from such references as: 'Watt did not of course wonder all these things at the time, but some he wondered at the time, and the others subsequently' (W,128), indicating a desperate necessity to be truthful about the few certainties there are in the novel. Significantly,



however, by the time of Sam's meeting with Watt, responsibility is shifted to the latter: ' Thus I missed ...much I suspect of great interest touching ... the first or initial stage of the second or closing period of Watt's stay in Mr. Knott's house. / For Watt's sense of chronology was strong' (W,163) -- and even then he adds 'in a way' (W,163) to attenuate the claim. All these temporal quirks present fictional time as verbal play utterly divorced from real life and epitomized by Arsene's: 'And I ... am not here any more either, and the reason for that is this, that when you came in I went out' (W,55). Underlying all these chronological difficulties, of course, lies the novel's central theme of the chasm between language and reality -- verbal tenses and time are but poorly related.

#### XI. Narrative Viewpoint

As with chronology, narrative viewpoint has an ambivalent function in Watt, serving both to outline and undermine the novel's structure. Opening as a third-person narrative, the book reveals the clearcut periphery of its world through the traditional device of an apparently omniscient narrator. The introductory section sticks close to the consciousness of Mr. Hackett, within whose range of vision the hero, Watt, momentarily passes, but whose received notion of what a man should be is upset by such a mysterious creature. Christine Brooke-Rose describes the projection of Watt's world as 'slightly out of focus as if observed ... by someone outside the human race, outside the world and

outside time',<sup>1</sup> and here we see the reversal of this process: Hackett is presented as being very much of the world, and his notion of Watt, which we are invited to share, is distinctly non-human. The shift in perspective between this introductory section and the main block of narrative in Chapter I, where Watt becomes the centre of attention and the world is far less competently revealed, underlines the differing nature of the two regions and the hero's incongruity in the Hackett domain. The narrator can still range freely from one consciousness to another at the railway station, giving breadth and solidity to this transitional zone, but the first signs that his knowledge is limited are already appearing. He is uncertain about the milk-can, for instance, 'full as it perhaps was of milk' (W,22), and the matter of the occupant of Watt's carriage, which we were told was empty, must either be a miracle or a mistake on the part of the narrator. Ruby Cohn attributes much of the "consternation behind the form", as Beckett called it, to the doubts that arise concerning narrative viewpoint,<sup>2</sup> and the first indication of real trouble appears in the incompatibility of the narrator's uncertainties with the concept of one capable of dominating the whole scene: 'This incident was of too common a kind to excite any great interest among those present. But there were connoisseurs on whom the exceptional quality of Watt was not lost

<sup>1</sup> 'Samuel Beckett and the Anti-novel', p.40.

<sup>2</sup> 'Watt in the Light of The Castle', p.156.

... These were content' (W,23).

The lack of factual information about Mr. Knott's establishment is reflected in the strict limitation of the narrative to Watt's uncomprehending viewpoint, once he is settled in the house. The reader is more knowledgeable than he, briefly, just after his arrival: 'Watt was so busy ... moving his hat to and fro behind him, that he neither saw, nor heard, the door open and a gentleman come in.... Here then was something again that Watt would never know' (W,36); but this is not particularly disturbing until suspicion is aroused concerning the nature of the narrator. Whereas, up to the account of Watt's life in Mr. Knott's house, we are under the impression that the story is being told by an omniscient narrator, expanding or contracting his range of vision to suit the needs of his narrative, from now on it becomes increasingly obvious that he is untrustworthy and extremely restricted in viewpoint -- what Wayne C. Booth would undoubtedly classify as a 'fallible or unreliable narrator'.<sup>1</sup> The first hint of his weak position comes in the mention of Watt's having a 'mouthpiece' (W,66), becoming more obvious in his reference to 'the scant aptitude to receive of him to whom [these communications] were proposed' (W,72); so that the introduction of the first person is carefully prepared for and scarcely noticeable: 'it seems probable that [unformulatable events] recurred no more, at the period of Watt's revelation, to me' (W,76).

<sup>1</sup> The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961), p.158.

By the time the narrator's subordinate status is openly stated, it comes as no surprise: 'And if Watt had not known this, that Erskine's key was not a simple key, then I should never have known it either, nor the world. For all that I know on the subject of Mr. Knott ... and on the subject of Watt ... came from Watt, and from Watt alone' (W,123). Awakening doubt encourages the reader to question the source of information concerning Arsene's speech, when he learns that Watt 'wondered what Arsene had meant, nay, he wondered what Arsene had said, on the evening of his departure' (W,77). Despite the explanation in the Addenda -- 'Note that Arsene's declaration gradually came back to Watt' (W,248) -- he is unlikely to be assured. The dubious source of the ending of Arthur's story is less disturbing, since it concerns a sub-fiction: 'In another place ... he might have told this story to its end, told the true identity of Mr. Nackybal (his real name was Tisler and he lived in a room on the canal).... But on Mr. Knott's premises ... this was not possible, for Arthur' (W,198), but it is further evidence of the narrator's untrustworthiness. Again, as Watt is leaving the Knott establishment, the narrator slips in some suspect information: 'Micks had left the kitchen before Watt. But Watt, not knowing this ... felt regret' (W,221), and the inclusion of the comment: 'he only realized it much later' does not clarify the issue.

A further alteration in perspective helps to set off the novel's central episode, the meetings between Watt and Sam,



already isolated both temporally and spatially. Here the narrator's active presence lends a measure of solidity to a story in danger of lapsing into unreality. Once again Watt becomes the object of a consciousness which guarantees his existence. Mr. Hackett originally served this purpose, but since, on reflection, he is revealed as a mere figment of Sam's imagination -- how could the details given be known without Watt's presence? -- he is no longer an acceptable witness. Now we have a clear picture of the different levels of reality with which the book deals. As directly apprehended by the narrator, reality is a retreat from society, possibly a lunatic asylum, where rejected mankind is 'the other scum' (W,150), and communication, not to mention human relationships, is virtually impossible. The Knott domain is revealed through material organised by Sam but ostensibly supplied by Watt; its nature is ambiguous and unstable; while seeming to be illusion, it is nonetheless offered as Watt's conception of reality. Watt's journey to and from Mr. Knott's house is even more of an enigma; partly guaranteed by Watt's presence, and partly unaccounted for, it evades labelling. Lastly there are the frontier regions where Watt is either absent or no longer the centre of consciousness through which the scenes are filtered; these offer the traditional setting of stable reality which the reader expects and in which he feels at home. Ironically, however, the shifting narrative viewpoint shows them to be pure fiction, with even less relation to objective truth than the areas of Watt or Sam, since they are

based on material unavailable to Watt and so can only have their origin in Sam's imagination. The narrator even draws our attention to the fictional framework he has given Watt's story: 'As Watt told the beginning of his story, not first, but second, so not fourth, but third, now he told its end' (W,214). However, his explanation -- 'Two, one, four, three, that was the order in which Watt told his story' (W,214) -- merely adds to the temporal confusion.

Once the narrator's true relationship with his story is known, the artificiality of intrusive omniscience becomes immediately obvious. While in Mr. Knott's house the tendency to add body to the narrative is kept well under control, but once Watt leaves its precincts the control slackens. On his way, 'a strayed ass, or goat, ... raised its head, as he passed. Watt did not see the ass, or goat, but the ass, or goat, saw Watt. And it followed him with its eyes while he passed ... out of sight' (W,222). At the end of the novel, a goat emerges on to the road in front of Messrs. Gorman, Case and Nolan: 'The goat hesitated, in the middle of the road, then turned away. The clatter came fainter and fainter ... and came still faintly when the pale had disappeared' (W,245). Both incidents are undeniably fictitious; they are a trick to permit Watt to bridge the gap between reality and fiction. An object of the goat's, or ass's, consciousness (Watt's presence accounts for the doubt), his existence is established in the novel's professedly imaginary areas also. And, since the goat in turn becomes an object in the railwaymen's consciousness, the

two episodes highlight the gulf separating Beckett's concept of man from man as he is portrayed in novels built on nineteenth-century notions of realism. Here, however, we are forced to accept that, at least for one who perceives the world as Beckett does, Watt's fluidity is closer to the truth than, say, the vivid sketch of Mr. Case, who belongs to the puppet world of Miss Carridge, sharing as he does her taste for 'George Russell (A.E.)' (W, 227 & M, 108).

### XIII. The Thematic Factor

Interweaving themes play an important part in Watt in effecting narrative cohesion, since plot is emasculated and story is at best the "tape-worm" required by E. M. Forster. Murphy's quest for bliss becomes Watt's quest for reality and the means to express it -- a theme whose fundamental nature leads it to play a significant role in determining the material to be included in the novel. The basic philosophical uncertainty which underlies the whole book appears in the themes of language failure, doubts about meaning and value, the need to be witnessed, all closely related to the dominant expression of the quest in terms of uncertainty as to the nature of reality. Over against the themes of scepticism about life is the theme, in counterpoint, of the identification of opposites, which may be seen as arising from death as the one certainty (the significance of death is increasingly felt in the later novels), subdued in Watt to the

concept of time-the-leveller. These cross-referential themes cut through the novel's formal structure and break down distinctions between centres of consciousness, emphasising the unity of the vision of life portrayed in the book. Many have already appeared in Murphy, and will reappear in succeeding works, drawing the reader beyond the narrative to the author for whom the novel's world becomes pretext for self-exploration. The recurrence of themes -- and indeed narrative material -- is a striking characteristic of Beckett's work and has the paradoxical effect of undermining the authenticity of the story, by spotlighting its fictional nature, while at the same time revealing the lyrical quality of the utterance, through relating it directly to the creative consciousness in which it has its origin, so that it is revealed as a personal expression by the author. In particular the reappearance of themes from novel to novel contribute to the development of an overall form, a sense of continuity between the works, communicating a unity of subject which suggests the nature of a saga rather than that of a collection of isolated writings.

Where the quest theme in Murphy took the form of a physical, outward-looking tendency opposed to a mental, inward-looking tendency, expressed in terms of movement and stasis, Watt builds on these oppositions to establish a more complex pattern dominated by the interplay of motifs of illusion and truth, closely associated with those of stability and flux. Mr. Hackett belongs to Neary's world: 'He knew also that he would not long remain



motionless, for the state of his health rendered this unfortunately impossible' (W,5), where clarity and stability are the order of the day, and which, in Watt, is ultimately revealed to be illusion. In Mr. Knott's establishment everything changes all the time like the 'flux of forms' (M,79) of Murphy's inner world. This illusory appearance, if not the absolute truth, is at least a subjective truth, and is certainly not the blatant falsehood that the factual presentation of Mr. Hackett's realm turns out to be. As Arsene puts it: 'it was not an illusion, as long as it lasted, that presence of what did not exist' (W,43). The apparent flux covers the basic stability of a closed system, again harking back to Murphy: 'Watt had more and more the impression ... that nothing could be added to Mr. Knott's establishment, and from it nothing taken away, ... any significant presence ... proving that presence at all times, or an equivalent presence, and only the face changing' (W,129). The relative permanence of Mr. Knott -- by name and sporadic hint reminiscent, if not symbolic, of the concept of the void at the heart of reality ('for the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something': W,74) -- is indicated by Arsene: 'And yet there is one who neither comes nor goes, I refer I need hardly say to my late employer, but seems to abide in his place, for the time being at any rate' (W,56). Watt himself seems to fluctuate between shadow and substance, as we have seen. Even on his journey he seeks immobility: 'Watt moved no more, as far as they could see, than if he had been of stone' (W,14-15); and,

once in Mr. Knott's house, 'Erskine was for ever running up the stairs and down them again. Not so Watt' (W,115), the latter mostly 'stayed quietly where he was' (W,115-6). Arsene, whose concentrated speech includes virtually all the major Beckettian themes,<sup>1</sup> hints at the attraction of stasis as a means of escape from the pain of being alive in the world: 'often I turn, tears blinding my eyes, haw! ... perhaps longing to be turned into a stone pillar or a cromlech in the middle of a field' (W,47-8).<sup>2</sup> If related to Beckett's comment in Proust -- 'The Proustian stasis is contemplative, a pure act of understanding, will-less' (Pr,91) -- art becomes a means of transcending the suffering and meaninglessness of the world, and the attraction of stasis to successive Beckettian heroes takes on a new significance.

Sam, the narrator, makes frequent mention of the difficulties which the gap Watt senses between language and reality indirectly causes him, since he is dependent upon Watt for his material. In addition, he indicates that the idiosyncrasies of Watt's manner of speech are so complex that he can recall no example of the more difficult communications, so that his claims

<sup>1</sup> Richard Coe points out that 'The Trilogy, in fact, is little more than a detailed working-out of all the themes that Arsène crams into the first few pages of his Jeeves-like lucubrations'. (Coe, p.47).

<sup>2</sup> This theme appears increasingly from Molloy on; cf. Moran's cri de coeur: 'Etre vraiment enfin dans l'impossibilité de bouger, ça doit être quelque chose! ... Et avec ça une aphasie complète! Et peut-être une surdité totale! Et qui sait une paralysie de la rétine! Et très probablement la perte de la mémoire! Et juste assez de cerveau resté intact pour pouvoir jubiler!' (Mo,217).

to have established contact with Watt, however imperfect, seem highly dubious. Watt, of course, is troubled to the end by the need to formulate experience, to turn, as he says, 'a disturbance into words', to make 'a pillow of old words, for his head' (W,115). Arsene's lucidity here too throws light on the problems with language in this novel: 'what we know partakes in no small measure of the nature of what has so happily been called the unutterable or ineffable, so that any attempt to utter or eff it is doomed to fail' (W,61). Mr. Hackett's self-confident consciousness is equally affected by language failure; his habit of calling things his just because they please him indicates bad faith in the use of words: 'He knew they were not his, but he thought of them as his' (W,5). He even has difficulty understanding others: 'Your what? said Mr. Hackett. / My wom, said Tetty' (W,11). Mr. Nixon directly opposes him to Watt from the point of view of representation in words: 'He does not invite mention, he said .../ Not like me, said Mr. Hackett' (W,16), a distinction in keeping with Mr. Hackett's place in the rational, purely fictional realm, and Watt's in the irrational, but more real realm.

The same pattern is followed in the theme of uncertainty of knowledge and existence. Mr. Hackett, seeking knowledge of Watt, asks all the wrong questions. When he first sees him he does not even recognise him as a human being, taking him for 'a parcel: a carpet for example, or a roll of tarpaulin' (W,14); but the narrator takes it for granted that the reader has recognised

the hero, and gives him no further introduction than 'But Watt moved no more' (W,14). Mr. Hackett is alone in his uncertainty. To his self-confident existence he cites a suspect witness, as the narrator is quick to point out: 'Officer, he cried, as God is my witness, he had his hand upon it. / God is a witness that cannot be sworn' (W,6). Watt's uncertainties, on the other hand, are genuine, and the nature of the narrative forces the reader to share them. Indeed he is sometimes aware that Watt's world is even more uncertain than the hero himself realises: for instance, Watt does not even wonder about the nature of the little voice which tells him why Mr. Knott does not like animals, but ironically relates the incident to the theme of values -- 'Watt never knew quite what to make of this particular little voice, whether it was joking, or whether it was serious' (W,88) -- while the reader is still wondering whether it is real or not. The whole Knott establishment is based on the principle of mutual guarantees of existence. Arsene tells us that the servingman is 'calm and glad he witnesses and is witnessed' (W,40). Watt sees in the questions Erskine puts to him 'an acknowledgement of Watt that Watt was not slow to appreciate' (W,82). Concerning Mr. Knott Watt surmises: 'Of himself he knew nothing. And so he needed to be witnessed. Not that he might know, no, but that he might not cease' (W,202).

Appropriately, the coincidence of contraries, or ultimate sameness of things, applies throughout the whole fictional world.



Images of light and darkness, and coming and going, are the main motifs. At nightfall in Mr. Hackett's world: 'the western sky was as the eastern, which was as the southern, which was as the northern' (W,22). In the waiting-room, at the end, 'the darkness gradually deepened. There was no longer a dark part and a less dark part, no, but all now was uniformly dark' (W,235), and by the time 'the exhilarating dawn' (W,235) appears, Watt is no longer the centre of consciousness. A comic version of the levelling effect of time appears when it reduces Watt's dark coat and light hat to the same colour: 'So it is with time, that lightens what is dark, that darkens what is light' (W,217). Beckett draws frequently on these motifs of light and dark to express ultimate sameness -- related to meaninglessness or nothingness -- in the world; and the very similarity of wording helps gather the thematic threads together, diminishing the affect of inter-novel boundaries. The image of Arthur's retiring to bed with his nightlight registers thematically on Watt's mind: 'through the open door the light, from darkness slowly brightening, to darkness slowly darkening' (W,214).<sup>1</sup> In the end, darkness always conquers light in Beckett's universe. The "come and go" motif runs through Watt's consideration of the chain of servingmen of which he is part, and Arsene, as ever, sums up in advance: 'for the coming is in the shadow of the going and the going is in the shadow of the coming' (W,56). And a lyrical

<sup>1</sup> of. Celia's room 'brightening against the darkening that was its end' (M,49), and the more pessimistic version in Malone Meurt, Sapo watching daylight penetrating the darkness of the Louis' kitchen: 'il y entrerait sans cesse, débité et renouvelé par le dehors, il y entrerait sans cesse et y mourait, dévoré par l'ombre au fur et à mesure' (MM,52).

passage in the Addenda openly relates the theme to the human condition:

dead calm, then a murmur, a name, a murmured name, in doubt, in fear, in love, in fear, in doubt, wind of winter in the black boughs, cold calm sea whitening whispering to the shore, stealing, hastening, swelling, passing, dying, from naught come, to naught gone (W,247)

This indicates a far-reaching development from the image of Murphy's birth/death mark, and leads on to Pozzo's bitter 'elles accouchent à cheval sur une tombe' (G,154), and the brief metaphors for life in the 'dramaticule' Come and Go and the short play Breath.<sup>1</sup>

The combination of thematic polysemy and inter-work reference is a powerful unifying force, and the concentration and density by which it is achieved are in part responsible for the poetic quality of Beckett's writing. A fine example of this economy and associative power comes from the use of Arsene's remark on the relation between coming and going. Their interdependence leads Watt to expand the problem of the servingmen into a discussion of the effect on the concept of time of ambivalent causality.<sup>2</sup> In the closing stages of the novel it is comically developed into a practical difficulty for Watt. His last moments in Mr. Knott's

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Harvey examines the "come and go" motifs as part of the theme of tempus fugit. But this aspect emphasises a nostalgia for the pleasures of life rarely sensed in Beckett's work which harps more on the Pascalian "misère de l'homme" (see Janvier, pp.263-264 for related images) and the vanity of human wishes, seen in even darker form in the absence of a God. For Beckett the distress of fleeting life is totally overshadowed by the awe of eternity and the prospect of obliteration in death. (Harvey pp. 391-392).

<sup>2</sup> Discussed in detail in Coe, pp. 50-52.

house are spent wondering whether to set down his bags, shut the door to block the draught and sit down, or some combination of the three, and he is unable to decide because: 'the sitting down was a standing up again, and the load laid down another load to raise' (W,220). Here Watt forestalls Estragon's question about Lucky: 'Pourquoi ne dépose-t-il pas ses bagages?' (G,39), exemplifying the two-way play of causality in time, whereby the effect also determines the cause, in utter disregard for fictional boundaries -- a comic twist already used in Watt: 'The question to this answer was the following' (W,129). And Watt relates the theme of ultimate sameness to that of the problem of values by concluding that 'if one of these things was worth doing, all were worth doing, but that none was worth doing, no, not one' (W,220).

### XIII. Repetition

The use of repetition helps to create formal and thematic associations which clarify the novel's structure and relate it to the body of Beckett's work. In its most simple form repetition of phrases and images helps to relate varying levels on the reality/illusion scale, or to dissociate them. As we have seen, humps and footwear and poor eyesight connected characters with widely disparate claims to reality, and linking phrases can perform the same service. When Watt asks Mr. Case the time we are told: 'It was as he feared, earlier than he hoped' (W,228), and later when Mr. Gorman consults the time likewise: 'It was as he

feared, later than he hoped' (W,238); here the similarity of wording formally connects the authentic moment, which Watt has experienced and so can pass on to Sam, with one dreamed up by the pseudo-omniscient narrator. Mostly, however, linking phrases serve a more complex function. Arsene's fictional Mr. Ash uses 'as God is my witness' (W,44), preparing us for disillusionment concerning the truth of Mr. Hackett's conversations, where he used the same phrase; and conversely, once we know that Mr. Hackett's words came from Sam's imagination, our doubts about Arsene's speech increase. Before the chimneys of Mr. Knott's house disappear from view, as Watt leaves his service, we are told: 'Watt was always lucky with his weather' (W,222); and after they are no longer visible and Watt has had his "passing weakness", we again learn: 'Watt had always great luck with his weather' (W,224). The need for repetition, as if the first reference had never been made, heightens the impression that everything in the Knott domain is of a different order of experience than that outside it. Then the very last paragraph of the story: 'Mr. Nolan looked at Mr. Case, Mr. Case at Mr. Nolan, Mr. Gorman at Mr. Case ...' (W,246) cannot fail to evoke the complicated exchange of glances among Louit's committee in Arthur's story, underlining the fictive nature of the closing scene.

Of even more subtle effect are leitmotifs which echo across the novel's borders. In contrast with the familiar nightfall in Mr. Hackett's stable zone, Watt awaits dawn in his new abode:



'the unsoiled light of the new day, of the new day at last, the day without precedent at last' (W,63). Here the excessive repetition helps to recall the introduction to Murphy's parody of the novel's conventional world, where 'the sun shone ... on the nothing new' (M,5), linking it, by affinity of contrast, with Mr. Hackett's realm, and indicating the break with traditional concepts of reality which occurs as we enter the Knott domain. Arsene draws on an obscure joke to illustrate his loss of ability to identify things, his slip from a false sense of a secure relationship between himself and the external world: 'What was changed was existence off the ladder. Do not come down the ladder, Ifor, I haf taken it away' (W,42).<sup>1</sup> But Murphy too introduced this joke, when we learn that Ticklepenny has unscrewed the ladder leading to the hero's garret, so that he can now draw it up after him: 'Do not come down the ladder, they have taken it away' (M,130) -- omitting the "Ifor", if/or, better suited to Arsene's epistemological context. Apart from reinforcing the

<sup>1</sup> Jacqueline Hofer, in 'Watt', relates this to Wittgenstein's linguistic ladder, but Beckett told Professor Fletcher, in 1961, that he was in fact referring to a Welsh joke and had only recently come in contact with Wittgenstein's work (see Fletcher, Novels, pp.87-88). It should be noted that while the Olympia Press and Grove Press editions speak of the 'existence of the ladder' (my italics), the later Calder edition changes this to "off", which significantly alters the meaning, although the application of the philosopher's theory is still not inappropriate.

Michael Robinson points out that the French translation of the ladder joke in Murphy becomes 'Ne descendez pas par l'échelle, Louis' (M/Fr, 137), Louis being the French for Ludwig which suggests a reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein, there being no other Louis in Murphy (The Long Sonata of the Dead, p.311); but this could well be a retrospective Beckettian joke.

sense of continuity between the two novels, the repetition highlights in retrospect the symbolic aspect of Murphy's self-imposed isolation. The ladder motif also establishes a formal connection between Mr. Hackett and the Knott regime, since we find that his hunchback is due to an accident in Glencullen: 'It was there that I fell off the ladder' (W,13), he tells Tetty -- Mr. Hackett, like Ticklepenny, is relegated to social reality, and so stays at the bottom of the ladder -- and Arsene's subsequent use of the image neatly emphasises the chasm separating the two realms while hinting at a certain symbolic significance in Mr. Hackett's fall.

All these recurring phrases, sentence structures and images heighten our awareness of the ultimate origin of the written work in the mind of its author. This is the direct aim of simple inter-novel repetitions. We learn of Murphy that 'he was not illegitimate' (M,172), and Arsene makes the same claim (W,56). Murphy tells Celia a joke: '"Why did the barmaid champagne?" ... "Because the stout porter bitter"' (M,97), which in Watt is incorporated in Arthur's story: 'Louit, going down the stairs, met the bitter stout porter Power coming up' (W,196). Such irrelevant re-use of material can only point to the mind of Samuel Beckett as the source of both novels, opposing any tendency on the part of the reader to suspend disbelief and encouraging the readiness to appreciate the lyrical quality of the narrator's thought in Watt when he breaks in on the narrative.

Despite the fact that Watt's 'dislike of battology was very strong' (W,163), his novel is undoubtedly the most repetitious of all Beckett's work -- at least in view of the endless variety of content that could logically have been included. Words and phrases recur, hammering out the dominant theme of uncertainty, emphasising points and adding ironic touches to otherwise emotional sentences. Nothings and negatives abound: '[Watt] was never to know, never, never to know, how the back door came to be opened' (W,35); 'The little that is known about it has not yet all been said. Much has been said, but not all./ Not that many things remain to be said ... for they do not' (W,72-3); 'Mr. O'Meldon ... who had taken a nought for a one, and not, as he ought, for a nought' (W,190); 'Mr. Knott, needing nothing if not, one, not to need, and, two, a witness to his not needing, of himself knew nothing' (W,202). The "perhaps" which Beckett himself cited as the key word in his plays<sup>1</sup> is slipped in on all possible occasions. Variations on "the reason for that is" (frequently including the terms "obscure", "unknown", "perhaps") underline Watt's quest for knowledge and the obstacles it meets with, as do the refrains "to mention only", "as far as Watt could see", "so Watt supposed", "in Watt's opinion". 'Doomed to fail, doomed, doomed to fail' (W,61), iterates Arsene lugubriously, while Sam counteracts the confusion of Watt's speech in the asylum with pedantic and unnecessary precision clashing bizarrely with mock-emotional repetition:

<sup>1</sup> Tom F. Driver, 'Beckett by the Madeleine', Columbia University Forum, IV,3 (Summer 1961), p.23. Cf. the Unnamable's: 'un oeil, ça pleure pour un oui ou pour un non, les oui le font pleurer, les non aussi, les peut-être surtout' (I,176).



For we seldom left our mansions, Watt seldom left his mansion and I seldom left mine.... [When we did,] the disappointment of one of us at least was almost certain, and the regret, the bitter regret, at ever having left his mansion at all, and the vow, the hollow vow, never to leave his mansion again, never never to leave his mansion again (W,149).

The exasperatingly repetitive lists of possibilities including all combinations, part of what Christine Brooke-Rose describes as the book's 'slight legal flavour allowing for all contingencies',<sup>1</sup> is also due to the underlying uncertainty. In a way, Watt is exemplifying the dilemma of L'innommable; everything must be said in the hope that the truth will out, even if unrecognised. In the end it must be allowed that Sam's comment on Watt's dislike of battology is ambivalent; beneath the amusing irony lies the implication that the novel's inclusiveness, while comic, is essential, and its recurring phrases are the inevitable expression of the hero's obsessive nature and desperate situation.

#### XIV. Conclusion

In Murphy the omniscient narrator tended to overshadow his narrative and both he and the reader constantly entertained a feeling of superiority over the novel's world. In Watt, however, the creator/creation relationship is not so clearcut. Sam disclaims responsibility for narrative content, only seeing himself in the role of editor -- 'the difference was so nice as with advantage to be neglected, in a synopsis of this kind' (W,77) --

<sup>1</sup> 'Samuel Beckett and the Anti-novel', p.41.



giving footnotes 'for the guidance of the attentive reader' (W,211). On his own admission he is inefficient, since he has difficulty understanding Watt; he leaves gaps in the text where he is unable or unwilling to be specific; he allows himself to be sidetracked into word-games: 'have still some food got, in the old pot, when ten o'clock strock, from the old clock' (W,93); he is careless: 'One of these bags was the grousebag, already perhaps mentioned' (W,216), but this is the first mention. His incompetence, however, gives his story a certain authenticity. Comments on the writing -- '(tired of underlining this cursed preposition)' (W,132), 'How hideous is the semi-colon' (W,156) -- tend to have the same effect, where in Murphy they undermined the narrative. This is due to the narrator's presence in the story in Watt, where Murphy's remained outside, so that comments on his text do not have the same distancing result.

Sam, however, is undeniably a fictional persona behind whom is felt the presence of a hidden creator -- Wayne C. Booth's 'implied author'.<sup>1</sup> His is the mind in which Sam's story is formulated and, as thematic and stylistic references show, also responsible for creating Murphy. Since, within the narrative, Sam has surrendered responsibility to Watt, only an external creator can be responsible for the plan to 'change all the names' (W,254), given in the Addenda, or the ambiguous instruction: 'no symbols where none intended' (W,255). On this level we are

<sup>1</sup> The Rhetoric of Fiction, p.153.

again made conscious of the novel as a linguistic construction unrelated to the world of phenomena ('Haemophilia is, like enlargement of the prostate, an exclusively male disorder. But not in this work': W,100).<sup>1</sup> Murphy, of course, made this point too, but there all the emphasis was on the hypocrisy of the novel's pretensions to reveal truth, whereas here the incommensurability of language and reality is a basic premise, so that, ultimately, the only way an author can be honest is to admit the impossibility of guaranteeing a relationship between his work and the external world -- what Beckett elsewhere calls submission 'to the incoercible absence of relation'.<sup>2</sup> From this point of view Sam's incompetence rings true and fluency deceives; so that the desire to countermand the deceitfulness of language results in passages parodying philosophical tracts, advertising patter, biblical and academic language, and the descriptive formulae of the conventional novel.

We are never permitted to be wholly certain who is responsible for the irony of the narrative. Is Sam being ironic in taking Watt's preoccupation with trivialities seriously: 'But Watt was not so foolish as to suppose that this was the real reason why Mr. Knott's slops were not emptied away on the first-

<sup>1</sup> Michael Robinson, in The Long Sonata of the Dead, remarks that 'the use of an ordering, commentating intelligence within the text is one of the most successful ways in which fictional material presented in the third person can attain the illusion of fact rather than imagination' (p.103); but this view neglects to take the ironic uncertainty about narrative responsibility into account.

<sup>2</sup> 'Three Dialogues', p.125.

floor' (W,64-5)? The tone is similar to the more acceptable comment: 'Watt could not accept incidents like the Galls' visit for what they perhaps were, the simple games that time plays with space' (W,71), which leads us to the presence of the implied author manipulating an ingenuous fictional narrator.<sup>1</sup> The same source of irony is indicated by the appearance in Sam's personal narrative of obsessions identical with those of Watt and Arsene, and even Arthur -- the passion for symmetry, logic and inclusive statement -- casting doubt on the objectivity of Sam's account, and giving the reader a chance to appreciate, in retrospect, the irony of such comments as: 'Watt attached to this matter an importance, and even a significance, that seem hardly warranted' (W,114).

From all points of view, in Watt, the reader is obliged to keep his opinions under constant review -- his notions of time, reality, narrative responsibility and meaning undergo successive modifications. He is never allowed to establish a stable relationship with the novel which, like incidents experienced by Watt, appears to be 'of great formal brilliance and indeterminable purport' (W,71). The literary product, the novel, like Murphy, is devalued and ridiculed; but here it is shown to succeed in its role as pretext for communicating experience. Like Sterne's, Beckett's novel attacks its own form, but for a purpose; but

<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Harvey suggests that through the introduction of Sam, 'intermediary between Watt and Beckett, ironic distance is reduced and sympathy becomes possible' (Harvey, 384); but surely Sam is responsible for heightening the irony surrounding Watt, and ironic distance becomes even more marked once he himself is subjected to doubts.

where Tristram Shandy is deflated to portray a vision of the world comic in its understanding, vision in Watt is comic in its impotence. What is experienced cannot be formulated, by the nature of things, so Beckett concentrates on communicating how man experiences reality. Watt dramatises a way of seeing rather than a seen world and thus may be said of it as Beckett said of Joyce's Finnegans Wake: 'Here form is content, content is form'.<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag points out, in her essay 'On Style', that 'in the strictest sense, all the contents of consciousness are ineffable.... Every work of art, therefore, needs to be understood not only as something rendered, but also as a certain handling of the ineffable'.<sup>2</sup> While Beckett debunks the "something rendered", all his efforts to convey truth are concentrated on evoking the unsaid: 'Car pertes et profits se valent dans l'économie de l'art, où le tu est la lumière du dit'.<sup>3</sup> David Hesla remarks that Beckett uses Nicholas of Cusa's Via negativa, but with a different aim: no longer to clear the way to the sight of God, but to define the void at the heart of man's existence.<sup>4</sup>

If there is any development to be detected in Watt it is surely in the hero's attitude to meaning and language. At the

<sup>1</sup> 'Dante... Brune. Vico... Joyce', p.14.

<sup>2</sup> Against Interpretation (1967), p.36.

<sup>3</sup> 'La peinture des Van Velde', p.351.

<sup>4</sup> 'The Shape of Chaos: A Reading of Beckett's Watt', p.103-105.



beginning of his experience 'he desired words to be applied to his situation' (W,78); as David Heda so neatly puts it: he seeks to 'domesticate reality, to lead it about on a leash of words'.<sup>1</sup> By the end, although his desire is still there, he is aware of its vanity: 'It seemed to him that ... it was greatly to be deplored, that he cared what it was, coming along the road' (W,225-6). His efforts to build a linguistic bridge between thought and extension fail, and the novel ends in an impasse: Watt cannot cease wanting to comprehend the world, and cannot cease failing. Molloy, the next hero of a published novel, will have escaped that impasse by accepting failure as his dimension. He will go on trying to formulate because it is the nature of man,<sup>2</sup> but desire will be no more. In terms of the artist's dilemma, Molloy understands with Beckett that, as author-hero, he has 'no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 'The Shape of Chaos: A Reading of Beckett's Watt', p.93.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. The Unnamable's 'il faut continuer, je ne peux pas continuer, il faut continuer, je vais donc continuer' (I,261).

<sup>3</sup> 'Three Dialogues', p.103.

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CHAPTER IV

M O L L O Y

## I. Introduction

Molloy is the first of Beckett's major French works and also the first of a Trilogy of novels completed by Malone meurt and L'innommable. Between it and Watt (the last of the English novels) there lie three short stories, 'L'expulsé', 'Le calmant', and 'La fin', written 1945-46 but not published in definitive versions until 1955,<sup>1</sup> another short story, Premier amour, and a rejected, trial novel, Mercier et Camier, both withheld from publication until 1970. The Nouvelles were Beckett's first venture into French,<sup>2</sup> and with the change of language came the major thematic and stylistic developments apparent in Molloy.

<sup>1</sup> In Nouvelles et textes pour rien; an early version of 'L'expulsé' was published in 1947, and 'La fin' is a modified and extended version of 'La suite', published in 1946.

<sup>2</sup> The reasons for the change have been examined in detail by several critics (in particular see Coe, pp.13-14, and Janvier, pp.225-226). Among the principal suggestions are the need to control the suggestive quality of English (Coe and Kenner), the evasion of cultural taboos (Janvier), the acquisition of a different kind of virtuosity (Fletcher). One might also suggest that a change of language permits a different quality of thought and in a sense imposes what for Beckett would be welcome limits: manipulation of an adopted language would require more conscious control, counteracting the tendency of language to run away with itself.

The long vagabondage of the French heroes begins with the ejection from the family home depicted in 'L'expulsé', and the loneliness and uncertain existence which isolation from society brings in its wake is reflected in a switch from third- to first-person narration. Mercier et Camier attempts to extend the framework of the Nouvelles to support the more massive structure of a novel. To do this Beckett reverts to third-person narration and retreats from the isolation of the hero of the Nouvelles to a mutually supporting couple, probably modelled on Watt and Sam. But where the latter couple, between them, bore narrative responsibility, the external narrator in Mercier et Camier breaks in on the inner solitude of the heroes, blocking their fictional independence: 'Comme la présence d'un tiers, dit Mercier. Elle nous enveloppe. Je l'ai senti depuis le premier jour.... Ça commence à me gêner un peu' (MC, 170-1). The work lacks body; the heroes are mainly presented from the outside, and we only reach them through their interminable, stylised conversations. 'Je survivais en parlant' (MC, 59), old Madden tells them, and their existence too depends on speech. It is therefore not surprising that Beckett transposed them to the theatre, in the end, where the couple has its justification as a means of transforming inner monologue into dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Clearly Beckett felt, as the book advanced, that Watt had progressed as

<sup>1</sup> Colin Duckworth, 'The Making of Godot', Theatre Research, VII, 3, 1966 -- examines the extent to which material from Mercier et Camier is reworked into En attendant Godot, pp. 123-145.

See also Fletcher, Novels, pp. 113-114.



far as they into the inner realm (they never do succeed in setting out on their journey); accordingly he reintroduces his earlier hero, who gently suggests to the couple that they have retreated from the regions explored by the protagonist in the Nouvelles: 'Il naîtra, il est né de nous, dit Watt, celui qui n'ayant rien ne voudra rien, sinon qu'on lui laisse le rien qu'il a' (MC,198). The outcast of 'La fin' could never have entered a cafe and paid for his drink as do Mercier and Camier. As a result, the novel peters out towards the end, and never develops that inner density and subtle structural cohesion which form the hallmark of Beckett's best work. Like the later plays, to which this novel leads more directly than to the Trilogy, Mercier et Camier is a temporary rest from the lonely exploration of the inner regions of self: 'Certes il fallait de la force pour rester avec Camier, comme il en fallait pour rester avec Mercier, mais moins qu'il n'en fallait pour la bataille du soliloque' (MC,131). Molloy, then, springs directly from the Nouvelles, with their hero-narrators, openly subjective presentation and complete social alienation. Some of the later passages in Mercier et Camier, where the two heroes are viewed from a distance as they separate and re-unite on the road leading to the town, seem to form the basis of Molloy's vision of A and B from the hillside; but Molloy clearly identifies with the narrator watching, not the two men as they pass. Only the theme of the mysterious journey to be made comes from Mercier et Camier; and even it is better integrated into Molloy since it takes on symbolic overtones of the

story that has to be told, the artist's journey into the inner world, more appropriate to the author-heroes of the Trilogy.

While Beckett may be fairly included among Georg Lukács's "Modernist" writers, defined as those who hold a static view of the human condition,<sup>1</sup> what does develop in his work is his characters' awareness of their condition. And for Beckett awareness means scepticism with the creeping paralysis which inevitably accompanies it -- resulting, in terms of literature, in the impossibility of making positive statements. 'For me the area of possibilities gets smaller and smaller',<sup>2</sup> he told Israel Shenker. In the same interview he remarked that 'the more Joyce knew the more he could',<sup>3</sup> and this may be neatly reversed to describe Beckettian man: the more he knows he doesn't know, the more he can't. Even though Sam, in Watt, is undoubtedly unreliable and fallible, his presence inescapably endows the protagonist with some measure of objective existence. Watt becomes a positive statement which it is difficult to undermine. Molloy's shift to first-person narration removes this difficulty and permits the introduction of a policy of retraction whereby the narrative is rendered self-destructive, in keeping with the uncertainty of vision it portrays. There is no guarantee for

<sup>1</sup> The Meaning of Contemporary Realism (1962); see Chapter on 'The Ideology of Modernism', pp.17-46.

<sup>2</sup> 'Moody Man of Letters', p.1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.3.

the reality of Molloy and Moran; the fictional freedom to which Watt aspired is theirs completely. Where Watt wanted to tell his story, however, the heroes of Molloy feel no desire, only compunction. They are indeed in the line of Wayne C. Booth's "self-conscious narrators", as Professor Fletcher points out;<sup>1</sup> but as such their function is more complex than that of the narrators of Don Quixote or Tristram Shandy in that it is not confined to unification of the narrative but also emphasises the novel as pretext to meet the artist's obligation to write, reluctantly fulfilled. Thus, in Molloy, Beckett writes about a writer writing ostensibly about his past -- it is a past that is invented as he goes along -- but chiefly about writing and the artist's inner compulsion to create.

With this first novel of the Trilogy, Beckett's break with the traditional novel is complete. Its world is the world of the imagination, of pure fiction, making no representational claims. The breakdown of chronology discredits the story, as does the narrators' lack of conviction; plot is no longer discernible; characterisation, inconceivable in Molloy's narrative, in Moran's becomes a process of de-characterisation. Molloy is a clear renunciation of the Apollonian concept of art; nor does it aspire to the arcane. Where Watt was written about a 'non-knower, a non-can-er',<sup>2</sup> Molloy is written by such a one. For

<sup>1</sup> 'The Self-Conscious Narrator in Comic Fiction before Tristram Shandy', PMLA LXVII,1 (March 1952), pp.163-185; Fletcher, Novels, p.130.

<sup>2</sup> Israel Shenker, 'Moody Man of Letters', p.3.

this writer, as for the artist Bram van Velde, 'failure is his world'.<sup>1</sup> In Watt, Beckett, like Kafka, communicated a sense of the chaos and incomprehensibility of the world, communication was a positive act. For all its insubstantiality, as a novel it was too positive a creation, and its narrator, for all his protestations of weakness, was too capable to be true to the author's evolved understanding of the artist's possibilities. Molloy, Beckett's first novel about man as artist/philosopher, paradoxically obliged yet unable to express, is the first example of Beckett's most original contribution to the novel, taken by many as a denial of the very nature of the novel, a narrative dramatising man's inability to express either the external world or his own self. Beckett would agree with Lukács that in a novel 'the basic question is, and will remain: what is Man?',<sup>2</sup> but he holds the question to be unanswerable. For him writing entails exploration with no hope of final discovery, and his fictions are thus bound to be self-destructive. The intellectual approach to life depicted in Watt failed to grasp reality, so in Molloy Beckett tries to pierce the logical structures of the mind to portray his heroes' sense of existence before reason falsifies experience. To Gabriel d'Aubarède he said:

Je ne suis pas un intellectuel. Je ne suis que sensibilité. J'ai conçu Molloy/sic/ et la suite le jour où j'ai pris conscience de ma bêtise. <sup>3</sup>Alors, je me suis mis à écrire les choses que je sens.

<sup>1</sup> 'Three Dialogues', p.125.

<sup>2</sup> The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, p.19.

<sup>3</sup> 'En attendant Beckett', Nouvelles littéraires, 16 février 1961, p.7.



The severe restrictions in vision and style introduced in Molloy constitute an attempt to prevent "les choses que je sens" from taking on a solidity of their own once they become words on paper.

## II. Fictional World

In a way, we were enticed into Watt's world through false pretences. Readers intent on recognition rather than discovery accept Mr. Hackett's domain without undue difficulty, and their suspicion that all is not as it should be awakens slowly. Molloy makes no such concession -- or deception; we are plunged directly into unfamiliar, fictional terrain. The narrator offers us a world about which little can be said and in which no assertion is definitive. Ignorance and uncertainty prevail: 'Je ne sais pas grand'chose franchement' (Mo,5). Almost immediately Molloy indicates the temporary, impenetrable and fictional nature of his world:

Cette fois-ci, puis encore une je pense, puis c'en sera fini je pense, de ce monde-là aussi.... Tout s'estompe. Un peu plus et on sera aveugle. C'est dans la tête. Elle ne marche plus ... On devient muet aussi et les bruits s'affaiblissent. A peine le seuil franchi c'est ainsi (Mo,9).<sup>1</sup>

Moran, with his customary unconscious irony, reveals a similar experience of reality as flux -- 'de toutes parts m'assaillent les bruits des choses s'évitant, s'unissant, volant en éclats,

<sup>1</sup> Here we have a more economic and effective rendering of a passage from Mercier et Camier, exemplifying the greater suitability of first-person narration for Beckett's subject: 'C'est dans la tête, je te dis, dit Mercier. / Tu vois des formes qui n'existent pas, dit Camier. Des bouquets d'arbres ... là où il n'y en a point ... de hautes granges aussi et des meules immenses. Tout ça de plus en plus flou et cotonneux, comme si à vue d'oeil on devenait aveugle' (MC,175).

This theme of the world within a head runs right through Beckett's work (see Fletcher, Art, p.34), emphasising the inner nature of the fictional world.

mes yeux cherchent en vain des ressemblances, ... je chavire dans l'embrun des phénomènes' (Mo, 171) -- yet noticeably locating his story in an organised world, distorted by reason, 'massif et lent, où tout se meut avec la morne lourdeur des boeufs, patiemment par les chemins immémoriaux' (Mo, 172), which bears no relation to his experience. Beckett's very choice of verbal tense hints at the atemporal, inner nature of his novel's world. The use of the past definite for a first-person narrative in the confessional mode has the curious effect of continuously suggesting the fictional aspect of the monologue.<sup>1</sup> Although, as in Watt, this crumbling world becomes immobilised in words, Molloy, at least, is aware of the inherent conflict between language and the artistic procedure (to define which, in Proust, Beckett quotes Schopenhauer: 'the contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason': Pr, 87); in fact, he draws our attention to it: 'J'écoute et m'entends dicter un monde figé en perte d'équilibre, sous un jour faible et calme sans plus, suffisant pour y voir, vous comprenez, et figé lui aussi' (Mo, 59).

<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, Le degré zéro de l'écriture (Paris 1953), declares on this point: 'Retiré du français parlé, le passé simple, pierre d'angle du Récit, signale toujours un art ... Son rôle est de ramener la réalité à un point, et d'abstraire de la multiplicité des temps vécus et superposés, un acte verbal pur, débarrassé des racines existentielles de l'expérience, et orienté vers une liaison logique avec d'autres actions, d'autres procès' (p. 46). Thus modern experiential novels tend to use the past indefinite for first-person narration, to give an impression of lived experience (cf. Bernanos' Journal d'un curé de campagne, 1936, Sartre's La nausée, 1938, or Butor's L'emploi du temps, 1957). Beckett's choice of the past definite thus subtly implies an equation between formulated experience and fiction.

Where the foundations of Watt's world are insidiously undermined, Molloy is never accorded even temporary credibility on which to establish a framework for its world, since the first protagonist frequently warns us of his fiction's lack of guarantees, and the pretensions of the second ring false by reason of their location in the book, following on Molloy's iconoclasm.

Molloy, then, puts the reader on his guard against belief in the objective reality of his fictional world, and constantly reminds him of the subjective nature of the narrative. The action takes place in a mental universe, not subject to the rules man applies to the physical world. The mind can alter its imagined scene at will: 'au lieu d'observer j'eus la faiblesse de retourner en esprit vers l'autre, vers l'homme au bâton' (Mo,17)<sup>1</sup> -- and that the "bâton" swells to a "massue" a few lines later is not incompatible with the narrative's premises. Likewise the disembodied voice, which is so upsetting to the reader in Watt, is quite acceptable in Molloy's world (see Mo,140), where the necessity to determine its origin is no longer pressing. It is with tongue in cheek that Molloy warns us: 'Qu'on ne vienne pas me parler de la lune, il n'y a pas de lune dans ma nuit, et si cela m'arrive de parler des étoiles c'est par mégarde' (Mo,19). There is no question of our faith being shaken if we recall the earlier mention of the sky 'où sans les voir je sentais trembler les premières étoiles' (Mo,14), where we may, in any event, have detected a parodic note, or when we later read: 'Je dus m'endormir,

<sup>1</sup> The narrator in Mercier et Camier states openly: 'Il est des personnages dont il convient de parler dès le début, car ils peuvent disparaître d'un moment à l'autre, et ne jamais revenir' (MC,77).



car voilà qu'une énorme lune s'encadrait dans la fenêtre' (Mo,57), followed by:

Et il me revint également à l'esprit ... que mes nuits étaient sans lune et que la lune n'avait rien à y voir, dans mes nuits, de sorte que cette lune...me renvoyant à d'autres nuits, à d'autres lunes, je ne l'avais jamais vue, j'avais oublié qui j'étais (Mo,62),

leaving us in no doubt as to the inconsistency of the fictional elements and their lack of relationship with external reality.

Consciousness of his epistemological incapacity leads Molloy to open mockery of his literary creation:

C'était sur une route d'une nudité frappante, je veux dire sans haies ni murs ni bordures d'aucune sorte, à la campagne, car dans d'immenses champs des vaches mâchaient ... J'invente peut-être un peu, j'embellis peut-être, mais dans l'ensemble c'était ainsi (Mo,9) --

where removal of possible embellishments could leave little more than "une nudité frappante". Descriptive competence can only be parodic for the mind isolated from matter:

ces mêmes collines que d'aucuns appellent montagnes ... traversées par des vallées qu'on ne voit pas mais qu'on devine, à cause du dégradation des tons et puis à cause d'autres indices intraduisibles en mots et même impensables. Mais on ne les devine pas toutes, ... et souvent là où on ne voit qu'un seul flanc, qu'une seule crête, en réalité il y en a deux (Mo,11).

Molloy's ironic intent is clear in that this competent assessment which purports to be B's view of the hills from a distance, is preceded by an account of the latter travelling over them, 'à travers des régions qu'il semblait mal connaître, ou pas du tout' (Mo,11). Familiarity, in Molloy's world, breeds uncertainty only -- as he knows only too well, describing the other stranger's dog ('A ou B, je ne me rappelle plus': Mo,14) as 'un poméranien



je crois, mais je ne crois pas. Je n'en étais pas sûr au moment même et encore aujourd'hui je ne le suis pas, bien que j'y aie très peu réfléchi' (Mo,14).<sup>1</sup> Even the imagined world disintegrates and retreats into mystery on close examination:

Je repris mon chemin, ce chemin dont je ne savais rien, en tant qu'un chemin, qui n'était qu'une surface claire ou foncée, égale ou cahoteuse, ... et ce cher bruit de la chose qui s'écoule et qu'une brève poussière salue, quand il fait sec (Mo,37-8).

Molloy's is what Beckett would call an impressionistic vision of life, a 'non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception, before they have been distorted into intelligibility in order to be forced into a chain of cause and effect'.<sup>2</sup> Thus speech becomes a mere 'quelque chose de changé dans le silence' (Mo,135). Reason and uninterpreted consciousness, in this world, are antithetical: 'La démarche du béquillard, cela a, cela devrait avoir, quelque chose d'exaltant. Car c'est une série de petits vols, à fleur de terre; ... mais ce sont là des raisonnements, basés sur l'analyse' (Mo,97).

In the face of Molloy's revelations, Moran's clearcut pronouncements about the novel's world, and his confident air of control over it, can only appear self-deceptive. Similar in its predictability to the Hackett domain in Watt, Moran's house and its precincts appear to pose him no epistemological problems, since names and description come easily; and his relationship

<sup>1</sup> The French text allows equivocation here, with the possible shift from the colloquial to philosophical meaning of the verb "croire", lost to the English version.

<sup>2</sup> Proust, p.86.

with his surroundings is clear; like Hackett he is not afraid to call things his: 'mes ruches', 'mes voisins', 'ma chère église', 'ma verveine citronnelle' (Mo,143-4), and explains that 'C'est dans ce cadre que s'écoulèrent mes derniers moments de bonheur et de calme' (Mo,144). But having first experienced Molloy's vision we are bound to be suspicious of Moran's fluency, his familiarity with his world, and his manner of placing himself at its centre. If, at least in the early stages of his narrative, he depicts something akin to the social reality of the traditional novel, its fraudulence is obvious to the man taught to see with Molloy's eyes. Indeed he himself early confesses that his stable formulation is far from the flux he apprehends yet stubbornly denies -- 'la fausse turbulence du dehors' (Mo,171), he calls it, and insists that 'C'est en proie à ces sensations, qu'heureusement je sais illuscoires, que je dois vivre et travailler' (Mo,171). We do not share his confidence when he claims: 'Les moindres détails de ce rapport, je saurais les retrouver quand je voudrais' (Mo,152), and are not surprised when Gaber's report on Molloy finally escapes his memory. If his volubility carries him away to the extent of informing us: 'J'ai toujours eu beaucoup de succès avec mes dindes' (Mo,180), we are amused, not enlightened, by his later confession: 'J'ai menti en disant que j'avais des dindes, etc. Je n'avais que quelques poules' (Mo,197), since we have never shared his faith in the objective reality of his fictional world. Despite all his efforts, in retrospect he cannot disguise the unreliability of logic: 'Les rayons du soleil passaient par la

fente entre les rideaux ... J'en conclus que le temps était toujours au beau ... Je me trompais, le temps n'était plus au beau, le ciel se couvrait, il pleuvrait bientôt' (Mo,153).

As Moran's narrative progresses, the degree of self-awareness he is intent on presenting increases, so that he is more prepared to reveal the duplicity underlying narrative competence and to admit the incursion of doubt. Description of landscape wittily evokes a classical painting: 'la terre à cet endroit, et même les nuages du ciel, étaient disposés de façon à amener doucement les yeux vers le camp, comme dans un tableau de maître' (Mo,237), to be later reduced to 'ces solitudes glacées' (Mo,260). He mockingly reveals his creative process opting for the "vraisemblable" in preference to the "vrai": 'Et afin que cela paraisse plus vraisemblable j'ajouterai ceci...' (Mo,249). At the same time evidence of ignorance and uncertainty increases until it could almost be Molloy speaking: Moran does not know how he killed the visitor to his camp, nor why he quarrelled with his son; he is not sure if he recognises the farmer he meets on the way back: 'C'était peut-être le même qui avait proposé ... de ramener mon fils et moi dans sa voiture. Je ne crois pas' (Mo,267); even the birds in his garden are no longer dependable: 'je les reconnaissais et ils semblaient me reconnaître. Mais sait-on jamais' (Mo,272).

The discrepant worlds in the two parts of Molloy cannot fail to impress on the reader the subjectivity inherent in any version



of reality. Molloy's is the artist/philosopher's world, created in the full knowledge that it in no way expresses an objective truth. Moran's may be seen as an attempt to impose the traditional realist's vision of an organised world on Molloy's impressionistic vision, which inevitably collapses. The brute facts which underlie the creative act are hidden at some indefinable point where Molloy's and Moran's lines of vision converge -- somewhere between Molloy's forest and vast plains, and his town with its ramparts and boulevards and quickly gathering crowds, and Moran's concept of a 'région fort restreinte', with its 'agglomération que d'aucuns gratifiaient du nom de bourg et où d'autres ne voyaient qu'un village', five or six miles square, with 'un peu de tourbière, quelques bosquets et, à mesure que l'on s'approchait de ses confins, des aspects moutonnants et presque rieurs' (Mo, 206-7). If we look at aspects of the novel suggesting that Moran is the author of Molloy,<sup>1</sup> then Molloy's world, to quote Beckett's discussion of the work of art in Proust, is 'discovered, uncovered, excavated, pre-existing within the artist' (Pr, 84), i.e. within Moran. Molloy exists within the inner world, while Moran penetrates it from without -- like Watt -- and returns to the without a changed man. Molloy knows he cannot give a clear picture of the world he moves in, since its outlines are beyond his ken: 'les limites de ma région, je les ignorais ... il est possible que je sois maintes fois sorti de la mienne, en croyant y être

<sup>1</sup> See Edith Kern, 'Moran--Molloy: The Hero as Author', Perspective (Washington University), XI, 3 (Autumn 1959), 184-5.



toujours. Mais je préférerais m'en tenir à ma simple croyance, celle qui me disait, Molloy, ta région est d'une grande étendue, tu n'en est jamais sorti et tu n'en sortiras jamais' (Mo,99).

The divergency between what Moran thought he knew about Molloy's country and his actual experience of it -- 'Je me demande si je ne confondais pas avec un autre endroit' (Mo,208)<sup>1</sup> -- leaves us in no doubt that Molloy's portrayal of an indeterminate world is closer to the author's concept of the truth about human consciousness.

### III. The Heroes

The problem of characterisation in Molloy has given rise to much conflicting commentary by critics. For Professor Coe 'Moran remains a contrived and allegorical figure; Molloy from the first transcends his arid intellectual origins and achieves a rich and unforgettable humanity'; William York Tindall suggests that 'Oedipal Molloy or the Molloy within may be Moran's unconscious self and the reality that suffering discloses' (in Freudian terms this suggests Molloy as the id and Moran as the ego); Hugh Kenner sees them as abstractions, the irrational and the rational respectively; for Professor Fletcher 'Molloy is a figure of myth moving in a mythical country whereas Moran is a fairly prosaic wage-earner inhabiting a world of suburban villas and farms'; for Ludovic Janvier: 'une immanence, appelée Moran, rate une

<sup>1</sup> cf. Beckett's words to Lawrence Harvey: 'We don't know what our own personality is' (Harvey, p.435).

transcendence, nommée Molloy'; Dieter Wellershoff sees Molloy's narrative as 'the mythical consciousness which still experiences the duality of man and the world ... Moran's report, in contrast, represents a more enlightened, more realistic level of consciousness. It reduces the mythical narrative to a more barren kernel of experience'.<sup>1</sup> Such a variety of interpretations powerfully suggests that the creator of the characters does not intend them to be classifiable; he does not want a 'solution clapped on [the] problem like a snuffer on a candle'<sup>2</sup> -- his general attitude to exegesis. Closely allied to the question of their individual personalities is that of the relationship between them: are they two separate beings who merge, or two presentations of the same being? Ludovic Janvier carefully lists the number of physical and mental traits they share and the parallels in their respective stories, while indicating the difference in their attitudes.<sup>3</sup> The resemblances are indeed suggestive, but the differences prevent categorical pronouncement, and critics generally refrain from offering definitive solutions, although most agree that Moran, at the end of his story, is virtually indistinguishable from Molloy.

Perhaps the clearest picture of the protagonists of Molloy is formed through considering them in the light of Beckett's oeuvre,

<sup>1</sup> Coe, pp.55-56; Tindall, Samuel Beckett, p.23; Kenner, Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study, pp.107-109; Fletcher, Novels, p.126; Janvier, p.52; Wellershoff, 'Failure of an Attempt at Demythologization', Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin (New Jersey 1965), p.105.

<sup>2</sup> 'Denis Devlin', Transition No. 27 (Apr.-May 1938), 290.

<sup>3</sup> Janvier, pp.53-59.

taking their place in what Moran calls the 'galerie de crevés' (Mo,212), as consecutive efforts to embody the self in literature -- 'plutôt le même sale individu s'amusant à paraître multiple, en changeant de registre, d'accent, de ton, de bêtise' (I,132), as the Unnamable will surmise. Clearly the two characters have a single origin when perceived as literary creations, as personae of the implied author. To categorise Molloy as myth or Moran as allegory seems as unfair to the one as to the other, since it loses sight of the experiential level dealt with in the book, Molloy being wholly immersed in it and Moran piercing the protective barrier of habit to reach it.

Molloy is not portrayed as having a strong sense of individuality -- 'Il passe des gens aussi, dont il n'est pas facile de se distinguer avec netteté' (Mo,9), 'la sensation de ma personne s'enveloppait d'un anonymat souvent difficile à percer' (Mo,45) -- nor is he protected by a sense of order which delimits the self and the external world. It is therefore not surprising if he finds himself lacking in particularising features, as understood by the commissaire: 'je n'avais pas de papiers dans le sens où ce mot avait un sens pour lui, ni occupation, ni domicile, ... mon nom de famille m'échappait pour le moment' (Mo,31). Although he speaks of 'certaines façons de faire relevant de la seule commodité du corps, tels le doigt dans le nez, la main sous les couilles, le mouchage sans mouchoir et la pissade ambulante' (Mo,36), he shares these idiosyncrasies with other Beckettian creatures --



Watt, Mr. Nackybal and Malone -- just as Watt's ostensibly unusual appearance was shared by a long line of servingmen. Significantly, Moran's later description (if indeed it is of him) lends him no solidity, since it is unrecognisable, even as a man -- a discrepancy highlighting the subjective nature of the narratives:

Il chargeait plus qu'il ne marchait. Cependant il n'avancait que très lentement. Il se balançait, à droite et à gauche, à la manière d'un ours.

Il roulait la tête en proférant des mots inintelligibles.

Il était massif et épais, difforme même. Et, sans être noir, de couleur sombre (Mo,175).

Molloy is, above all, a consciousness, stripped of externals and so lacking any sense of the "characteristics" which an objective narrator would call on to identify him: 'Je n'avais ni goût ni humeur, je les perdais de bonne heure' (Mo,43). Clarity of outline requires objective vision, as he himself realises: 'je ne vois pas très bien, n'étant jamais sorti de ma région, de quel droit je parle de ses caractéristiques' (Mo,99).<sup>1</sup> He has lost the capacity to see himself as others see him, knowing the irrelevance of appearances: 'Y en avait-il un seul pour se mettre à ma place, pour sentir combien j'étais peu, à cette heure, celui dont j'avais l'air' (Mo,29). When Molloy does treat himself

<sup>1</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet -- Pour un nouveau roman (Paris 1963), p.28 -- cites Kafka and Faulkner as writers employing this new, utterly subjective manner of presenting man, and both he and Nathalie Sarraute advocate it warmly; but Beckett's people are further complicated by their self-consciousness and windowless monadism, leading to a vain search for the essence of self and a hovering on the brink of nothingness because of a Berkeleyan suspicion that esse est percipi (developed in Film to the desire for nothingness being obstructed by inevitable self-perception).



objectively it leads him to falsehood, as when he claims to have seen the moon from Lousse's window: 'je ne l'avais jamais vue, j'avais oublié qui j'étais ... et parlé de moi comme j'aurais parlé d'un autre' (Mo,62).<sup>1</sup> If there is an organised external reality, he is alienated from it and cannot relate to it in any way: 'qu'à tout cela il y eût des explications naturelles, je veux bien en convenir ... C'était moi qui n'étais pas assez naturel pour pouvoir m'insérer avec aisance dans cet ordre de choses' (Mo,65). Even his body is a stranger: 'Et quand je regarde mes mains ... elles ne sont pas à moi, moins que jamais à moi, je n'ai pas de bras, c'est un couple' (Mo,100). As a consciousness, his reality is of a different order, shifting from moment to moment: 'c'est le rocher qu'il the traveller seeking landmarks cherchera des yeux, et non pas le hasard à son ombre de cette chose bougeante et fugitive qu'est la chair encore vivante' (Mo,13). Molloy is not capable of witting action -- 'Car je ne sais plus très bien ce que je fais, ni pourquoi' (Mo,68) -- being fully concerned with simply being. At this basic level, existence is totally isolated; consciousness can only know itself in the sceptic's world, and all sense of relationship with anything outside itself is, if not illusory, at best unverifiable. The contents of consciousness thus can only be conceived of as fiction:

Alors voilà, il me quitte ... Et je suis à nouveau je ne dirai pas seul, non, ce n'est pas mon genre, mais ... rendu à moi, non, je ne me suis jamais quitté, libre, voilà, ... libre de quoi faire, de ne rien faire, de savoir, mais quoi, les lois de la conscience (Mo,17).

<sup>1</sup> The need for an observer to guarantee existence, central to the structure of the Knott domain in Watt, is beyond the range of Molloy who is fully engaged in being, while aware that his existence is in doubt for the outside observer.

For Molloy, to be is to be conscious, and if the consciousness empties the sensation of individual existence ceases: 'il m'arrivait d'oublier non seulement qui j'étais, mais que j'étais, d'oublier d'être. Alors je n'étais plus cette boîte fermée à laquelle je devais de m'être si bien conservé, mais une cloison s'abattait et je me remplissait de racines et de tiges' (Mo,73).<sup>1</sup> To avoid this loss of self the mind has to keep busy: 'il faut faire attention, se poser des questions, ... n'importe quoi qui vous empêche de perdre le fil du songe.... Moi je me posais ... des questions ... afin de me croire toujours là' (Mo,73-4). And in this admission lies a suggested motivation for Molloy's storytelling.

In considering the treatment of Moran it should be pointed out that the change which takes place in him is in the degree of self-awareness, not in the personality itself.<sup>2</sup> Moran presents himself to us at the beginning of his story as a self-possessed hero in an ordered world, who dismisses his sneaking sense of the flux of being as illusion. Unlike Molloy, he immediately supplies us with his name and background. However, his whole tale is seen in the ironic light of self-knowledge as acquired by the time of narration. Thus the hero's acts belie his original concept of self which takes the form of the traditional belief in a set character: 'Je ne faisais que des bêtises, moi si malin d'habitude' (Mo,162);

<sup>1</sup> This empty void is not to be confused with the "full" void of nothingness at the heart of being; the first entails abandonment of self to the flux of temporal life, the second ultimately unites the self to the atemporal void of eternity.

<sup>2</sup> Professor Fletcher holds that 'Moran changes as the book progresses whereas Molloy's personality remains static' (Fletcher, Novels, p.128).

Qu'un homme comme moi, si méticuleux et calme dans l'ensemble, tourné si patiemment vers le dehors comme vers le moindre mal, créature de sa maison, de son jardin, de ses quelques pauvres possessions, ... retenant sa pensée dans les limites du calcul tellement il a horreur de l'incertain, qu'un homme ainsi fabriqué, car j'étais une fabrication, se laisse hanter et posséder par des chimères, cela aurait dû me paraître étrange (Mo,176).

For both Molloy and Moran, in their capacity as narrators, "characteristics" are externals and as such are irrelevant to the inner world of the self -- a natural corollary of Beckettian dualism. Since man is felt to be isolated from the visible world, action too can only be illusion, so that a story of Moran in action becomes that of an actor play-acting to the enlightened Moran who narrates: 'J'allais assez volontiers jusqu'au bout de mes rôles' (Mo,188). What the second hero shows in his story is a probing beneath the stable, social concept of self to the underlying chaos, a process which he describes as 'un émiettement, ... un effondrement rageur de tout ce qui depuis toujours me protégeait de ce que depuis toujours j'étais condamné à être.... cette sensation qui de sombre et massive, de grinçante et pierreuse, se faisait soudain liquide' (Mo,230). Where once he had felt himself to be 'froid comme du cristal et aussi pur de fausse profondeur' (Mo,174), exploration of his inner world leads him to hidden depths in himself, and he senses the core of being: 'la merde qui attend la chasse d'eau' (Mo,252) - and the contrasting metaphors indicate the bitterness of disillusionment concerning the human condition. However, although disillusioned about man's relation to the outer world, Moran retains an intuitive sense of



the continuity of self. Despite enormous physical and mental change he cannot escape conviction of a mysterious inner unity:

ce ventre que je ne me connaissais pas restait mon ventre ... grâce à je ne sais quelle intuition. Et ... je continuais à me reconnaître et même j'avais de mon identité un sens plus net et vif qu'auparavant, malgré ses lésions intimes et les plaies dont elle se couvrait. Et à ce point de vue j'étais très nettement en état d'infériorité vis-à-vis de mes autres connaissances (Mo,263).

He has not yet come to the point of self-doubt reached by the later heroes.

Moran is often seen as preceding Molloy in the evolution of Beckettian man, but if we compare the two in their evolved state, at the time of narration, rather than as actors in the narrative, we see that it is the contents of consciousness -- the mental preoccupations -- that vary, rather than the level of awareness. Molloy concentrates on defining his mode of being, on discovery of the human condition, through reconstructing his life: 'C'est dans la tranquillité de la décomposition que je me rappelle cette longue émotion confuse que fut ma vie, et que je la juge, comme il est dit que Dieu nous jugera et avec autant d'impertinence' (Mo,36). He is not concerned with the nature of being: 'on est ce qu'on est, en partie tout au moins' (Mo,81). Moran's is a much more complex narrative in that it deals with two levels of existence -- the self-deception of purposeful living revealed by a disillusioned narrator. The narrative is used to seek the truth about the nature of self, conceived in terms of a journey inwards: 'quant à moi ... je ne pensais plus guère à lui. Mais



par moments il me semblait que je n'en était plus très loin, que je m'en approchais comme la grève de la vague' (Mo, 251-2) -- and the preceding text makes it unlikely that the "lui" refers to anything but the "moi", 'ce passe-temps fidèle' (Mo, 252).<sup>1</sup>

Molloy's vision of life sets a standard whereby we can appreciate the extent of the change in self-conception which takes place in Moran. From this point of view it is clear that the two protagonists are created in a necessary order: the first shows how Beckettian man is, the second how much this basic truth differs from the accepted norm.<sup>2</sup> When one sees the two men as concerned with the act of existing and the nature of self respectively, it immediately becomes evident that, while the successor to Molloy is Malone, Moran's successor is better understood as the nameless seeker of self in L'innommable.

Since both parts of Molloy are essentially verbal structures referring to nothing beyond themselves, the protagonists' function is of basic importance in the most literal sense. Remove Watt and Sam remained, in the preceding novel, and vice versa, but here the disappearance of either Molloy or Moran would entail the

<sup>1</sup> It is perhaps helpful to consider the two heroes as early embodiments of Beckett's sense of the split in self into perceiver and perceived, Molloy dealing with his relation to the Other, Moran seeking a clear picture of self as the Other would see it. This split is more subtly developed in L'innommable in the problems of Mahood and Worm, and forms the basis of Cascando, as Martin Esslin perceptively argues in his Introduction to Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, in Watt, Arsene first sets out the mode of existence in Knott's house, then Watt investigates its nature.

annihilation of their respective narratives. The narrator's consciousness is not only the source of the narrative, it is its raison d'être and its matrix, without which a shapeless heap of words is all that would remain. Each hero keeps strictly to his own part, however, and neither is used to link the two sections of the novel, which is thus denied organic unity as a fiction. True, Moran declares himself to be hunting Molloy, but he never finds him -- unless he fails to recognise him in the stranger to whom he gives bread, who spoke like one 'qui a perdu l'habitude de la parole' (Mo, 226-7). Although the two heroes share a fictional world, neither narrative encroaches on the other. The Molloy Moran seeks is not necessarily the same as the man we know from Part I, and he may even be incorrectly named. Ultimately neither narrative depends in any way on the other, so that the structural role of each protagonist is confined to the section in which he appears. This very split, while reinforcing the contrasts of mind and matter, perceiver/perceived, ego/id, role playing and being, forces the reader to seek structural unity on another level, so that the plane of reality on which the two heroes are personae of the implied author is never too far from our minds.

#### IV. Story

Like Watt, Molloy provides an extremely unsatisfactory storyline. Watt was portrayed as telling his story to Sam because of a desire to communicate experience; they conversed

through choice not compulsion: 'for though we could not converse without meeting, we could, and often did, meet without conversing' (W,149). Molloy and Moran, however, write solely because they feel compelled to do so. In terms of the story this necessity to tell becomes a means of earning money for Molloy and a requirement of his job for Moran. But both deny these as the root causes for narration: Molloy -- 'je ne travaille pas pour l'argent. Pour quoi alors? Je ne sais pas' (Mo,7); Moran -- 'J'ai parlé d'une voix qui me disait ceci et cela ... C'est elle qui m'a dit de faire le rapport' (Mo,272). Thus, as personae of the implied author, they translate the artist's biological need to create into fiction. Neither protagonist ever depicts himself as fulfilling a need to express lived experience, as did Watt, but only a need to speak. Molloy, as usual the more clear-sighted in matters concerning the truth of the creative process, states the case: 'Ne pas vouloir dire, ne pas savoir ce qu'on veut dire, ne pas pouvoir ce qu'on croit qu'on veut dire, et toujours dire ou presque, voilà ce qu'il importe de ne pas perdre de vue dans la chaleur de la rédaction' (Mo,40) -- and if the phrase is hard to follow it is because the matter is highly complex. Molloy is fully aware that expression automatically falsifies: 'Et chaque fois que je dis, Je me disais telle et telle chose, ou que je parle d'une voix interne ... ou que je me trouve dans l'obligation de prêter aux tiers des paroles intelligibles ... je ne fais que me plier aux exigences d'une convention qui veut qu'on mente ou qu'on se taise'



(Mo,134-5); and Moran's closing lines tacitly admit the same sentiment: 'Alors je rentrai dans la maison et j'écrivis, Il est minuit. La pluie fouette les vitres. Il n'était pas minuit. Il ne pleuvait pas' (Mo,272). Molloy early realises that his impressionistic method is foredoomed: 'même à cette époque, où tout s'estompait déjà, ondes et particules, la condition de l'objet était d'être sans nom, et inversement ... Et que je dise ceci ou cela ou autre chose, peu importe vraiment. Dire c'est inventer' (Mo,45-6). And so the storyline loses all significance, since it claims no relation to truth.

The story of Molloy's search for his mother is, in fact, never really told, any more than that of Moran's search for Molloy. Both narratives relate events that are largely incidental, although Moran's sequence runs more smoothly, in keeping with 'un homme comme moi, ... tourné si patiemment vers le dehors' (Mo,176). Neither quest is successfully concluded, yet the sequence of events is unaffected and the reader undisturbed by the lack of conclusiveness. It would have been just as easy to present the two journeys in the guise of the travels of picaresque heroes for all the attention paid to story development. Stories, any stories, fill the void of man's isolation, as Molloy appreciates: 'Ce dont j'ai besoin c'est des histoires'(Mo,16), 'De la fumée, des bâtons, de la chair, des cheveux, le soir au loin, autour du désir d'un frère. Ces haillons je sais les



susciter pour en couvrir ma honte' (Mo,20).<sup>1</sup> Fictional events are allowed no importance in themselves and their omission or insertion is arbitrary: Molloy -- 'je commence à en avoir assez de ces inventions et d'autres m'appellent' (Mo,103-4); Moran -- 'Je ne dirai pas les obstacles que nous eûmes à surmonter ... J'avais l'intention ... de raconter tout ça ... Maintenant je n'en ai plus l'intention, le moment est venu et l'envie m'en est passée' (Mo,244).

Molloy treats his search as an academic problem rather than an engrossing reality: 'Si j'étais dans la bonne ville, j'avais fait des progrès. Mais l'étais-je? Si par contre j'étais dans une autre ville, d'où ma mère serait nécessairement absente, alors j'avais perdu du terrain. Je dus m'endormir ...' (Mo,57) -- so boring is the subject that sleep overcomes him. When Moran kills the stranger who comes into his camp, his 'Je ne sais pas ce qui se passa alors' (Mo,234) constitutes a refusal to permit the reader to pay too much attention to the story; exciting action has no place in a verbal structure which does not claim the traditional support of social reality: 'Je regrette de ne pas pouvoir indiquer plus clairement de quelle manière ce résultat [la tête en bouillie] fut obtenu. Ça aurait fait un beau morceau. Mais ce n'est pas arrivé à ce point de mon récit

<sup>1</sup> It is this attitude to story-telling which dominates in Malone meurt, where Malone determines to fill the time before his death and combat solitude with stories: 'D'ici là je vais me raconter des histoires' (MM,9).

que je vais me lancer dans la littérature' (Mo,235), and the Swiftean irony and clinical language help to prevent the reader from getting emotionally involved, just as in the description of Molloy's brutal attack on the 'Je dis charbonnier, mais au fond je n'en sais rien' (Mo,128).<sup>1</sup> Fictional events are arbitrary mental products of no intrinsic interest, as Molloy clearly indicates: 'D'ailleurs ne prenons pas ces choses-là au sérieux' (Mo,18); and they can be altered at will, as even Moran is prepared to admit once his narrative has reached the stage of conscious creation: 'Ce faisant je compris que ma jambe se pliait à nouveau. Il ne me ressemblait plus ... Déjà mon genou se raidissait à nouveau. Il n'avait plus besoin d'être souple' (Mo,235). The reader's attention is thus centered on the mind creating the story, rather than on the sequence of events as such.

In Molloy, as in Watt, the reader periodically witnesses the conversion of thought into fictional fact, but if he has fully realised the mental nature of the world presented to him he will not find the process as bewildering as in the latter work. The degree of solidity which the narrator's presence conferred on Watt and his surroundings clashed violently with the irrational nature of the world in which such metamorphoses occurred; but Molloy's world is pure fiction: 'a jungle, an area of utter lawlessness where no rules of any sort apply'.<sup>2</sup> Logic and causality

<sup>1</sup> See Mo,129-130.

<sup>2</sup> Alec Reid quotes Beckett as giving this description of the novel, as he sees it, in contrast to the welcome restrictions of drama (Reid,p.20).

play no part in it, and the occasional open reference to the manner in which events are whimsically formed is sufficient to keep the reader from falling back into old habits of gullibility.

Of the traveller, A, Molloy claims:

Je savais que je pourrais le rejoindre, tout estropié que j'étais. Je n'avais qu'à le vouloir, Et cependant non, car je le voulais. Me lever, gagner la route, me lancer en clopinant à sa poursuite, le héler, quoi de plus facile. Il entend mes cris, se retourne, m'attend. (Mo,16).

The transition here from wish to event is speedily effected; but that the event belongs to a fictional world only and that the creative process is obstructed by the intrusion of active desires (cf. Murphy's ginger biscuits) is indicated by the characteristic retraction. Molloy can cheerfully describe his bicycle as 'une bicyclette acatène, à roue libre, si cela existe' (Mo,21), without feeling the need for Watt's addition in similar circumstances, cf. 'Yes such fish exist, now' (W,118).

If Moran is not as clear about the purely mental origin of his story as Molloy is, he certainly has his doubts about its representational claims: 'Peut-être l'avais je inventée Molloy's existence<sup>7</sup>, je veux dire trouvée toute faite dans ma tête' (Mo,173);<sup>1</sup> 'quand je parle d'agents et de messagers au pluriel, c'est sans garantie' (Mo,165), he tells us, and doubt soon spreads: 'cette lucidité atteignait parfois à une telle acuité que j'en venais à douter de l'existence de Gaber lui-même' (Mo,166).

<sup>1</sup> Beckett's reference in Proust to the work of art 'excavated, pre-existing within the artist' (Pr,84) comes to mind here, in support of the view of Molloy as a sub-fiction of Moran's.



He is even tempted to remove objective reality from Youdi and himself, but his self-knowledge is not yet as penetrating as Molloy's: 'J'étais un solide, parmi d'autres solides' (Mo,167) he insists. The ironic intent of Moran's realistic claims -- 'Et cela ne m'étonnerait pas que je m'écarte, ... de la marche stricte et réelle des événements' (Mo,206) -- is obvious, since he makes it clear that for him the importance of storytelling is to get the story told, not the story per se: 'il est même possible qu'on ne soit pas trop à cheval sur le chemin qu'il emprunte du moment qu'il arrive à bon port, dans les délais prévus' (Mo,206). Undoubtedly Moran is aware of the possibility that his story is built of imaginary elements, and its implausibility is even more obvious to the reader who has already witnessed Molloy's story-building. Events in Molloy do not receive the detailed treatment that they are subjected to in Watt for the simple reason that the emphasis is changed. No longer is the narrator trying to give a true account of what happens; he is quite happy to say anything that comes into his head, since he knows he can never relate his fiction to external reality and so has given up attempting to do so -- 'Des histoires, des histoires. Je n'ai pas su les raconter. Je n'aurai pas su raconter celle-ci' (Mo,213), sighs Moran, merging with the implied author.

To detect in Molloy the simple outline of a story with beginning, middle and end, is far from easy. In the first place



the novel has two beginnings: 'Je suis dans la chambre de ma mère' (Mo,7), which opens the text, and 'Cette fois-ci, puis encore une je pense ...' (Mo,9), which the narrator claims to be the true beginning: 'Voici mon commencement à moi. Ça doit signifier quelque chose, puisqu'ils le gardent. Le voici ...' (Mo,8). Then there is the question how to consider the book: is it two stories or one? If we try to treat it as a single story, then the textual ending has no relation to the beginning, referring as it does to a different consciousness, a different location, and a separate narrative: 'Alors je rentrai dans la maison et j'écrivis, Il est minuit ...' (Mo,272), where the moment of writing in question opens Part II of the novel, not Part I. But if we try to treat the novel as containing two stories we are still in difficulties, since the story of Part I is either unfinished -- we do not learn how Molloy manages to reach his mother's room -- or a lie -- to say that 'Molloy pouvait rester, là où il était' (Mo,141) denies the opening; and the end of Part II -- 'Il n'était pas minuit. Il ne pleuvait pas' (Mo,272) -- cancels its beginning -- 'Il est minuit. La pluie fouette les vitres' (Mo,142). Molloy, whose awareness of his own ignorance causes him to treat the process of creation as having greater validity and therefore being more worthy of attention than the object created, indicates the doubt which must surround events making up the body of the narrative(s). Some parts, as we have already seen, may be inventions or

embellishments; some Molloy openly suspects of being memories -- 'Mais c'est peut-être là des souvenirs' (Mo,10) -- or the reader familiar with Dublin may recognise as being so -- e.g. Nelson's Pillar (sadly, no longer there), with its 'escalier en colimaçon' (Mo,11), overlooking the Dublin "mountains", in the description of B's hills;<sup>1</sup> some scenes Molloy suggests as being akin to literary "identikits": 'ce fut peut-être un jour A à tel endroit, puis un autre B à tel autre, puis un troisième le rocher et moi, et ainsi de suite pour les autres composants' (Mo,19). The result is that to speak of a sequence of events in Molloy is a simplification which does not bear close examination. Our confusion and uncertainty about the nature of the novel's story is a deliberate policy on the part of the author; the shifting forms of his story reflect his vision of life and oblige us to share it: 'The confusion is not my invention', he said to Tom F. Driver, 'We cannot listen to a conversation for five minutes without being acutely aware of the confusion. It is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of'.<sup>2</sup>

## V. Plot and Motivation

It would be clearly inconsistent with Beckett's vision of

<sup>1</sup> The hesitant beginnings to the journey in Mercier et Camier share this setting in the Dublin mountains, with their mountain roads cutting through bogland, 'Quelques forts en ruines, quelques maisons en ruines. La mer n'est pas loin, les vallées qui descendent vers l'est permettent de la voir' (MC,165).

<sup>2</sup> 'Beckett by the Madeleine', p.22.

life if the fictional events which he uses to crystallise his way of seeing were to appear meaningfully organised: 'I'm not interested in any system. I can't see any trace of any system anywhere',<sup>1</sup> he said to Israel Shenker. The causal concept of plot is thus incompatible with his approach to the novel, which, as he indicated to Alec Reid, is rather that of an explorer to the jungle. While Watt attempted, rather unsuccessfully, to use events to give shape to his life,<sup>2</sup> the novel of which he is hero reveals his pattern as an imposition only -- a human concoction rather than an organic part of the fictional world. Molloy and Moran do not share Watt's obsession with logic and reasons, so that each in his own way is free to deprive his story of causality, and does not need to call on an outside narrator to do it for him. The protagonists of Molloy are both closer than their forerunner, Watt, to acceptance of their creator's view of the human condition; not only do they read no system into the world, but they consider themselves incapable of recognising one should it exist, so isolated are they from phenomena. This attitude is plain in their refusal to justify and interrelate the events they narrate.<sup>3</sup> As usual, Molloy is spokesman: 'Pour les détails, si on s'intéresse aux détails, il n'y a pas à se

<sup>1</sup> 'Moody Man of Letters', p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Hugo Charteris used people to build his novels in like manner, 'as vehicles for the patterns which I'm interested in making out of the times in which we live' ('A Novelist on his Novels', London Mag. N.S. VIII, 7th October 1968, p.18) -- indicating a view of art totally opposed to Beckett's.

<sup>3</sup> Mercier et Camier rarely permits the dimension of artistic self-consciousness to make itself felt, except in the occasional debunking remark by the narrator. The question of motivation for their journey, for instance, is never raised.



désespérer ... C'est pour l'ensemble qu'il ne semble pas exister de grimoire' (Mo,39).

Molloy uses the search for his mother as motivation for his journey, a whip to keep himself on the move. At the start of his travels he tells us: 'je résolu d'aller voir ma mère' (Mo,20), and spells out his need for justification for action:

Il fallait, pour me résoudre à aller voir cette femme, des raisons présentant un caractère d'urgence, et ces raisons ... ce fut pour moi un jeu d'enfant ... de m'en remplir l'esprit, jusqu'à ce que toute autre préoccupation en fût bannie et que je me prisse à frémir à la seule idée que je pourrais être empêché de m'y rendre ... séance tenante. Je me levai par conséquent ... (Mo,20-1).

But the actual formulation of reasons never takes place. The next time the question arises he tells us: 'Mes raisons? Je les avais oubliées. Mais je les connaissais, je croyais les connaître, je n'avais qu'à les retrouver pour que j'y vole, chez ma mère, sur les ailes de poule de la nécessité' (Mo,39), and since we know the reasons were never formulated, we are not led to expect success. If events were controlled by logic, indeed, failure would be the expected outcome, for the reader if not for Molloy: 'si j'étais capable de faire sans réflexion beaucoup de choses, ne sachant ce que j'allais faire que lorsque c'était fait, et encore, aller chez ma mère ne comptait pas parmi elles' (Mo,43), he tells us, when we know his motivation is based on an illusion. Being aware that Molloy the traveller is a re-creation (with and without the hyphen) of Molloy the author, we are bound to arrive at the complex conclusion that Molloy-the-author is supplying unidentified



reasons ex nihilo to keep Molloy-the-hero going -- telling him his path is plotted, as it were, when we are all fairly sure it is not. As a final obstacle to plot-minded readers, Molloy deliberately suspends his story before the course of action is run: he terminates his narrative at a point where the outcome of the quest is not only undecided but also no longer of interest -- 'Molloy pouvait rester, là où il était' (Mo,141). Any kind of pattern, then, which we might be tempted to impose on events, could only acquire its completion outwith the novel's limits -- a requirement which automatically invalidates it.<sup>1</sup> The fictional world is self-contained and the work's only future lies in its re-reading. And re-reading defies attempts to extort hints of a plot, since the novel opens with Molloy already arrived in his mother's room but incapable of saying if he actually contacted her: 'Etait-elle déjà morte à mon arrivée? Ou n'est-elle morte que plus tard? ... Je ne sais pas' (Mo,7-8).

Moran warns us, before his narrative is half completed, of the epistemological problems he faces owing to the extreme difference in the degree of self-awareness of his consciousness as he narrates and as it is depicted in the narrative: 'je dois ignorer à nouveau ce que je n'ignore plus et croire savoir ce qu'en partant de

<sup>1</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet explains the position clearly in discussing his film L'année dernière à Marienbad: 'l'oeuvre n'est pas un témoignage sur une réalité extérieure, mais elle est à elle-même sa propre réalité. Aussi est-il impossible à l'auteur de rassurer tel spectateur inquiet sur le sort des héros après le mot "fin". Après le mot "fin", il ne se passe plus rien du tout, par définition' (Pour un nouveau roman, p.132).

chez moi je croyais savoir. Et si je déroge de temps en temps à cette règle, c'est seulement pour des détails de peu d'importance' (Mo,205). The justifications supplied by the narrative for his movements are therefore much more precise than Molloy's -- he sets out in search of Molloy because Gaber brings him a message from his boss, Youdi, instructing him to do so, and he turns back for the same reason -- but, significantly, the justifications are themselves unmotivated, since we are told neither why Youdi orders him to go nor why he must abandon the search. Moran-the-hero claims to act 'dans l'intérêt d'un travail qui, s'il avait besoin de nous pour s'accomplir, était dans son essence anonyme, et subsisterait ... quand ses misérables artisans ne seraient plus' (Mo,177).<sup>1</sup> But since he claims to work under the instructions of Gaber and Youdi, of whose reality he early confesses misgivings, probably examples of the "dérogations" later referred to (see above), such a pretension seems ostrich-like as far as the story is concerned. In the end Moran too becomes incapable of definitive assertions; the penultimate page tells that Youdi requested the report and Gaber called for it -- 'Une lettre de Youdi...demandant un rapport. Il l'aura son rapport' (Mo,271) -- but the final page reverts to the explanation of a voice: 'C'est elle qui m'a dit de faire le rapport' (Mo,272). The intrusion of the disillusioned consciousness of Moran-the-

<sup>1</sup> Juxtaposition with Beckett's passage in Proust on the discovery of the work of art in the inner world -- 'The artist has acquired his text: the artisan translates it' (Pr,84) -- throws light on the Moran/Molloy relationship here, where Moran is referred to as the artisan. Thus Molloy becomes the artist and we understand his tendency towards anonymity, since his is the artist's vision producing art "dans son essence anonyme".

author ensures the clouding of the issue of narrative justification from quite early on: 'ce triste travail de clerc ... je m'y soumets pour des raisons qui ne sont pas celles qu'on pourrait croire' (Mo,203). And shortly the suggestion that Gaber is merely a fictional embodiment of the artistic urge is but lightly veiled: 'Et la voix que j'écoute, je n'ai pas eu besoin de Gaber pour me la transmettre. Car elle est en moi et elle m'exhorte à être jusqu'au bout ce fidèle serviteur que j'ai toujours été, d'une cause qui n'est pas la mienne' (Mo,204). The very language reflects the ambiguous nature of the voice: 'je la suis néanmoins, plus ou moins, je la suis en ce sens, que je la comprends, et en ce sens, que je lui obéis' (Mo,204).<sup>1</sup> In the end we see that the only motivation given in the novel is on the level of self-conscious art, since both Molloy's 'impératifs hypothétiques' (Mo,133) and Moran's mysterious little voice urging him on hint continuously at the creative act, i.e. the symbolic level of the narrative rather than the factual level.<sup>2</sup> In terms of the story ultimately Moran's actions are no better motivated than Molloy's, so that neither narrative develops according to any causal principle.

<sup>1</sup> The English version is unfortunately unable to reflect the wealth of ambiguous polysemy of the French. It loses the play on "je suis" in the sense of to be and to follow, and on "je comprends" in the sense of to understand and to include; it thus offers the rather tame 'But I follow it none the less, more or less, I follow it in this sense, that I know what it means, and in this sense, that I do what it tells me' (T,132).

<sup>2</sup> The artistic urge is in itself inexplicable, and, in his article on the Van Velde brothers, Beckett speaks of it in such terms as 'd'absurdes et mystérieuses poussées vers l'image' and 'd'obscurcs tensions internes' ('La peinture des Van Velde', pp. 350-1).



## VI. Narrative Movement

Movement in this novel too is basically circular. Each narrative, both temporally and spatially, turns back upon itself and its end is completed in its beginning. Molloy gradually clarifies the relation between the circular form, the cyclical concept of time and the closed system motif. Both narrative circles may be turned through again, just as they may have been turned through before: Molloy -- 'Et tout seul, et depuis toujours, j'allais vers ma mère ... Et quand j'étais chez elle, et j'y suis souvent arrivé, je la quittais sans avoir rien fait. Et quand je n'y étais plus, j'étais à nouveau en route vers elle' (Mo,134); Moran -- 'Car j'étais tranquille, je savais que tout allait finir, ou rebondir, peu importait' (Mo,250). At heart each work is a re-telling, in different words, of the same tale, as Molloy senses: 'On n'invente rien, on croit inventer, s'échapper, on ne fait que balbutier sa leçon, des bribes d'un pensum appris et oublié' (Mo,46).<sup>1</sup> Thus it is natural that the end of Moran's account should hint at Molloy's version of life: 'Je m'en vais ... J'ai des béquilles maintenant' (Mo,271), while Molloy's opens with a clear foresight of Malone, bedridden, paralysed and moribund. Life is a closed system, and if the details vary at any given moment, the fundamental nature remains unchanged,

<sup>1</sup> This concept is already innate in Watt's one year's service seen as sufficient since more would be 'a fragment of rigmarole re-read' (W,131), and the two references are related by the speaker in Comment c'est: 'une oreille pour entendre même mal ces bribes d'autres bribes d'un antique cafouillis' (CC,162).



progress is impossible. Thus the novel, as an imaginative translation of life, is faced with the problem of how to introduce variety into what is essentially uniform. Molloy's sucking stones illustrate the procedure: he can guarantee that all his stones will be re-sucked, but not necessarily in the same order (see Mo, 111); and Moran declares on the subject of inconsistencies in his tale: 'même à Sisyphe je ne pense pas qu'il soit imposé de se gratter, ou de gémir, ou d'exulter ... toujours aux mêmes endroits exactement. Et il est même possible qu'on ne soit pas trop à cheval sur le chemin qu'il emprunte du moment qu'il arrive à bon port' (Mo, 206). The two-part architecture of Molloy, with the similarities of character, incident and language which function formally as a means of creating structural unity,<sup>1</sup> successfully conveys Beckett's vision of the human condition as static and unalterable; Part I says that man is so, and Part II says that, no matter how he tries to see himself, he will always be so. Similarly En attendant Godot will say, through the same structural device, that life is so and will remain so. Thus the comment which Beckett made on Godot's form applies equally well to Molloy: 'One act would have been too little and three acts would have been too much'.<sup>2</sup>

## VII. Narrative Control

Where both Murphy and Watt are the work of narrators at

<sup>1</sup> See Janvier pp. 53-59.

<sup>2</sup> To Israel Shenker, 'Moody Man of Letters', p. 3.

pains to reveal, if for very different reasons, their control over events, narration for both the protagonists in Molloy is shown as a process of discovery, with no guarantee of the findings. Writing becomes an investigation of the nature of reality, what Michel Butor calls 'Le roman comme recherche';<sup>1</sup> Molloy speaks of 'l'époque que je découvre' (Mo,19), and even Moran feels he is 'davantage celui qui découvre que celui qui narre' (Mo,206). The only certainty in the mind of each hero from the beginning, concerning his story, is its ending, since in both cases the end, a man writing an account of his experience, is a condition of the narrative's existence. The device of commencing each story at its close guarantees a form for the chaos of remarks, objects and events incorporated -- 'a form that accommodates the mess', as Beckett puts it.<sup>2</sup> Molloy is completely dependent on the contents of his mind at any given moment for the substance of his monologue, and cannot refer back or forward in his narrative with any reliability: 'le pied de ma jambe raide (j'oublie laquelle, elles sont raides toutes les deux à présent)' (Mo,21), is followed by 'Soudain je vois, c'était ma jambe droite la

<sup>1</sup> Répertoire : Etudes et conférences 1948-59 (Paris 1960); 'le roman doit suffire à susciter ce dont il nous entretient. C'est pourquoi il est le domaine phénoménologique par excellence, le lieu par excellence où étudier de quelle façon la réalité nous apparaît ou peut nous apparaître' (p.8) -- for Butor, of course, discovery is constructive, where for Beckett it is a negative experience.

<sup>2</sup> Tom F. Driver, 'Beckett by the Madeleine', p.23.

raide, à cette époque' (Mo,38), only to revert to 'ma jambe malade, je ne sais plus laquelle' (Mo,52). If he can name his toeless foot, it is clearly through the possibility of immediate verification, but he cannot with confidence say when the trouble started: 'chez Lousse ma santé se maintenait, à peu près.... les désordres à venir, telle par exemple la chute des doigts de mon pied gauche, non, je me trompe, de mon pied droit, qui peut savoir à quel moment exactement j'en accueillis ... les funestes semences?' (Mo,83-4). It is with a hint of caprice that he finally locates the moment of losing his toes after leaving the beach: 'Je situe à cette époque le lâche abandon de mes doigts de pied' (Mo,123), but immediately belies such competent narration by a loss of knowledge: 'Mais savez-vous seulement de quel pied il s'agit? Non. Moi non plus' (Mo,123). Even the control of events from moment to moment is beyond Molloy's capacities: 'j'entrai dans le premier abri venu et j'y restai jusqu'à l'aube' (Mo,90), is quickly followed by 'Mais cela ne devait pas être un vrai abri et je n'y restai point jusqu'à l'aube, car un homme y pénétra peu de temps après moi et m'en chassa' (Mo,91); the story somehow defies his efforts to organise it: 'C'était décevant, vouloir profiter au moins des célèbres murmures de la forêt et n'arriver à entendre que du gong' (Mo,137).

Moran too is presented as never being in total control of his material. Retrospective narration has to recover lost material, and he learns as he goes along: 'c'est à peine si,



dans le silence de ma chambre, et l'affaire classée en ce qui me concerne, je sais mieux où je vais et ce qui m'attend que la nuit où je m'agrippais à mon guichet' (Mo,206).<sup>1</sup> He must retell his tale to rediscover it -- like Sisyphus, 'qui sait s'il ne croit pas à chaque fois que c'est la première?' (Mo,206).

Thus we see him at the moment of writing considering the experience he relates as part of an inaccessible rather than a remembered past, permitting the narrative to acquire a semblance of futurity, and a measurable change of attitude between start and end of narration:

Elle me dit aussi, cette voix, ... que le souvenir de ce travail soigneusement exécuté jusqu'au bout m'aidera à supporter les longues affres de la liberté et du vagabondage. Est-ce à dire que je serai expulsé de ma maison, de mon jardin, un jour, que je perdrai mes arbres ... et toutes les absurdes douceurs de mon intérieur, où chaque chose a sa place, où j'ai tout ce qu'il faut sous la main pour pouvoir endurer d'être un homme' (Mo,204-5) --

to be compared with 'combien il me devenait indifférent de me posséder' (Mo,231), and the categoric 'Je ne supporterai plus d'être un homme, je n'essaierai plus' (Mo,271), as the tale ends. In the course of the story, as the level of awareness changes, facts, as externals, become less accessible: 'Je lui donnai cinq

<sup>1</sup> Thus the dilemma posed by the clash between free will and pre-destination, between progressive time and cyclical time, as symbolised by the closed system, is bound into the novel's structure. Molloy saw it in terms of the freedom of the unformulated against the prison of words: 'vous dire pourquoi je restai avec Lousse ... cela m'est impossible. C'est-à-dire que j'y arriverais sans doute, en me donnant de la peine. Mais pourquoi m'en donnerais-je? Pour établir de façon irréfragable qu'il m'était impossible de faire autrement?' (Mo,76).



livres, en coupures de dix shillings ... Il compta les coupures. Quatre livres dix, dit-il' (Mo,218-9); 'Cette nuit-là j'eus une scène assez violente avec mon fils. Je ne me rappelle pas à propos de quoi. Attendez, c'est peut-être important. / Non, je ne sais pas' (Mo,248). Even early on, where facts are still available, Moran's narrative control is poor: long-term prediction proves false -- 'Molloy, celui avec qui j'allais prochainement être aux prises' -- and short-term not less so -- 'Deux remarques', 'Cela fait trois remarques. Je n'en avais prévu que deux' (Mo,177 & 178). Beckett himself points up the significance of this approach to literary creation: 'The kind of work I do is one in which I'm not master of my material.... I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past'.<sup>1</sup>

#### VIII. Selection of Narrative Material

For Beckett, the problem of selecting material for incorporation in this novel is subject to one condition only: that it remain true to the vision of life of the narrators, the contents of whose consciousness it represents in turn. Material cannot be evaluated in terms of story, since narration is a means of

<sup>1</sup> Israel Shenker, 'Moody Man of Letters', p. 3 -- one could cite Faulkner's idiot narrator in The Sound and the Fury, which perhaps Lukács had in mind when he spoke of 'the parallel streams of consciousness of the idiot and of his rescuer' in Molloy (The Meaning of Contemporary Realism, p.32), but Faulkner felt the necessity to clarify Ben's account through the reinforcement of three other narrators, giving it a coherence directly opposed to Beckett's intentions here.

investigation and its content is not an end in itself. Molloy explains the predicament: 'il faut choisir, entre les choses qui ne valent pas la peine d'être mentionnées et celles qui le valent encore moins. Car si l'on voulait tout mentionner, on n'en finirait jamais, et tout est là, finir, en finir.... Et si on se trompe, et on se trompe, ... c'est souvent de bonne foi' (Mo,61). This is not a stream-of-consciousness novel as is sometimes maintained;<sup>1</sup> on the contrary the selection process of each narrator becomes part and parcel of the narrative content, so that 'the terrible fluidity of self-revelation',<sup>2</sup> so feared by James, is seen to be controlled by the added dimension of self-conscious artistic creation, whereby the narrator's orientation and propensity for boredom are witnessed at work.

The choice of story for Molloy results from his sense of isolation and need for companionship which he sees as basic in the human condition and expresses in the vision of the travellers, A and B,<sup>3</sup> 'deux hommes ... un petit et un grand' (Mo,10), who may or may not know each other -- 'Dire qu'ils se connaissaient, non rien ne permet de l'affirmer.... Mais ils se connaissaient peut-être' (Mo,10), who exchange a few words, then pass on in opposite directions: 'A vers la ville, B à travers des régions qu'il

<sup>1</sup> See Lukács loc.cit., or Northrop Frye, The Modern Century (Toronto, 1967), p.69.

<sup>2</sup> Henry James, Preface to The Ambassadors (New York 1902: London 1909) XXI, p.xix.

<sup>3</sup> Separated even more in the English version, as many critics have noted, where they become A and C.

semblait mal connaître' (Mo,11).<sup>1</sup> Molloy's tale is presented as a reaction to the realisation of loneliness: 'Mais à propos du désir d'un frère je dirai que m'étant réveillé entre onze heures et midi ... je résolu d'aller voir ma mère' (Mo,20). Anything that helps him discover the truth about existence is relevant, so that storyline, memories, reflexions or day-dreams are equally valid as a means to this end -- if equally lacking in inherent merit since the truth revealed is the ignorance and impotence inherent in the human condition. Story does form a guideline for the reader however, a thread to reveal the movement of the narrative: 'Tout cela pour indiquer que le fait d'avoir rencontré Lousse et de l'avoir même fréquentée ... ne prouvait rien quant à son sexe' (Mo,89), explains Molloy, to justify the account of his affair with Ruth/Edith. He can use the story as a distraction: 'Dire que je fais mon possible pour ne pas parler de moi. Dans un instant je parlerai des vaches, du ciel' (Mo,17). He has to be on his guard against it too, however, since it quickly tends to take on a life of its own, giving its narrator an air of dominating external existence false to his sceptical vision. Thus the account of Lousse's encounter

<sup>1</sup> Not only the description and setting of A and B recall the closing scenes in Mercier et Camier, but also the uncertain relationship between them. Clearly, by the end of Mercier et Camier, Beckett was intent on undermining the relationship between the couple: 'Ils se parleront encore, mais ce sera par l'effet du hasard ... Mais se sont-ils jamais parlé autrement?' (MC,180-1). In Molloy, if they speak, we hear no words, and they part in opposite directions where Mercier and Camier separate at a simple fork in the road. Beckett's use of the material from Mercier et Camier necessitated further separation of the couple who had too nearly disguised the essential solitude of interiorised man.



with the policeman is abruptly ended: 'Non, je ne peux pas rapporter ces échanges imbéciles. Je dirai donc seulement que le sergent de ville lui aussi finit par se disperser' (Mo, 48-9) -- and the unusual verb reflects the mental nature of the episode, with its overtones of disintegration. The lack of interest and direction in the narrative frequently makes it difficult for him to continue, so that he reverts to his present condition as a last resort: 'ai-je dit que le vent était tombé? Une pluie fine qui tombe, ça écarte en quelque sorte toute idée de vent. J'ai des genoux énormes, je viens de les voir ... Sorti donc enfin de l'impasse ...' (Mo, 93). Molloy quickly tires of and discards anything that does not tend towards the truth -- 'je dis toujours ou trop ou trop peu, ce qui me fait de la peine, tellement je suis épris de vérité' (Mo, 50). Anything that risks assuming a value or meaning is suspect, since man is incapable of discerning either; accordingly the insignificant is considered more suitable material: 'Que j'aie des genoux énormes, que je me lève encore de temps en temps, on ne voit pas très bien d'abord quelle signification cela peut avoir. J'en fais état d'autant plus volontiers' (Mo, 93). However, since ultimately all speech distorts truth, nothing can keep Molloy's attention for long, so frequent changes of subject are essential if the monologue is to continue.

For a large part of Moran's narrative, his selective process is not consciously portrayed (although it can be logically calculated by the alert reader), since he is representing himself at a time when resolutely concentrated on the big world about



him rather than the little world of self.<sup>1</sup> This is compensated for by the more strongly felt presence of the implied author -- rarely sensed in Molloy's section -- through the elements of the monologue which parallel and echo the first part. On this level, although Moran himself appears to have little choice in selecting material for his narrative, the overall consciousness responsible for the novel can be clearly seen at work. Only the overall author could know the implications of the name Molloy, given to Moran's quarry, and we are bound to lay responsibility for the choice of the name at his door -- what more suitable tale can a man tell who wishes thereby to find the inner self hidden beneath illusory appearances, than to portray himself as hunting Molloy, the name given to the real nature of man as seen by the novel's hidden creator? If the elements of Moran's story have no inherent necessity, they frequently have a formal logic, in that their selection is justified as a means of creating cohesion between the two parts of the novel through repetition. As the narrative progresses, Moran-the-hero becomes less of a puppet, and thus can assert himself with regard to the selection of material more and more forcefully, revealing a scorn for action in the visible world every bit as biting as Molloy's: 'Je n'ai pas l'intention de raconter les diverses aventures qui nous arrivèrent, à moi et à mon fils ... Ce serait fastidieux. Mais

<sup>1</sup> The degree of Moran's self-deception is reflected in the inclusion of his son Jacques in his narrative, where his very attempts to define the relationship between them ironically reveals the absence of one -- this couple runs no risk of disguising the impossibility of communication between men as did Mercier and Camier. Molloy, significantly, is alone, and if he had a son once, he can remember no relationship with him: 'Il est impossible que j'ai pu m'occuper de quelqu'un' (Mo, 8).

ce n'est pas là ce qui m'arrête. Tout est fastidieux, dans ce récit qu'on m'impose' (Mo,203); thus his change of heart in this regard simply appears ironic: 'Mais j'en raconterai brièvement quelques-unes, parce que cela me paraît souhaitable, et pour donner une idée des méthodes de ma pleine maturité' (Mo,205).

### IX. The Time Factor

As in Watt, the time-scale which organises Molloy is that of the creative consciousness. Since Molloy and Moran are self-conscious narrators, speaking in the first person, this is a much more active time-scale in the latter novel than in the former, where the temporal scheme was frequently unidentifiable. Here the clearly indicated source of the monologue leaves the reader in no doubt as to whose "here and now" is being used as the dominant point of reference. Each section of the novel is immediately located temporally in the present moment of the consciousness responsible for it: Molloy -- 'Je suis dans la chambre de ma mère' (Mo,7); Moran -- 'Il est minuit. La pluie fouette les vitres' (Mo,142). The narrators' self-consciousness emphasises the creative process, so that we are constantly aware of the moment of literary composition, and the verbal expression of the narrative in the past tense is seen as a fictional convention rather than a genuine reference to irrevocable time gone by. Although both narrators claim to be recounting past experience, basically they consider that retrospective narration is a process of discovery rather than re-creation; but, unlike Watt, neither

expects to learn anything useful. From another point of view the time gap between experience and formulation is seen to represent the inevitable distortion involved in expression, so that the latter is always essentially fiction: 'Je dis ça maintenant,' says Molloy, 'mais au fond qu'en sais-je maintenant, de cette époque, maintenant que grêlent sur moi les mots glacés de sens et que le monde meurt aussi, lâchement, lourdement nommé?' (Mo, 46). Even Moran, for all his resolutions not to let his present awareness intrude on the past with which he is concerned, is not wholly blind to the impossibility of the task: 'Mais les chemins changent d'aspect, refaits en sens inverse' (Mo, 256). The time-scale of the creative consciousness, referring to both the creative act and to the creator's physical presence, acts as a powerful unifying force in Molloy. Because of the active role of each narrator in his section of the novel, this chronology is felt with much greater intensity here than in Watt, which explains to a large extent the impression of greater cohesiveness.

It is in Molloy's narrative that the temporal level of fictional creation is most clearly dominant -- which perhaps accounts for the consensus of opinion among critics that, of the two heroes, Molloy has the greater humanity. He is affected by Cartesian dualism as other Beckettian heroes, so that his "here and now" is split between the physical -- in bed in his mother's room -- and the mental -- the little world of the mind where the story is created. The physical realm is recalled by periodic



references to, for example, his hands, or his knees -- 'Ainsi de temps en temps je rappellerai mon existence actuelle dont celle que je conte ne peut donner qu'une faible idée' (Mo,93). The mental realm is evoked when the creative process is dramatised: 'Mais il va falloir maintenant que je me sorte de ce fossé' (Mo,39); or commented upon: 'Qu'il est difficile de parler de la lune avec retenue!' (Mo,58); or explained: 'Et si je parle si longuement de ce couteau, c'est que je l'ai toujours quelque part je crois' (Mo,67). Moran, whose fictional chronology is more ordered -- he is concerned with a past state of affairs and its essential difference from the present -- relates his present to the past, albeit a fictional one, rather than the future; i.e. he thinks of his story as a re-interpretation rather than a creation. His imagination is oriented towards the past: 'Me rapportant maintenant en imagination à l'instant présent, j'affirme avoir écrit tout ce passage d'une main ferme et même satisfaite' (Mo,239). In his narrative, therefore, the temporal level of the creative consciousness is not so forceful -- it is closer to that of Sam in his role as editor, in Watt, where Molloy's resembles that of a Watt-turned-author. Moran's "here and now" is thus mainly evoked through a present judgement of the past: 'Et ce soir je trouve étrange que j'aie pu y songer, à mon fils ... dans un moment pareil' (Mo,149), or comments on the writing: 'Comme je déteste cette exclamation' (Mo,244). His dramatisations of the creative act concern third persons only, and so do not endanger the order he has imposed on his



story: 'Et là le berger s'écarte pour laisser passer ses bêtes ... Puis il va vers sa maison ...' (Mo,248), 'Les soeurs Elsner s'arrêtent de lire, lèvent la tête, se regardent, écoutent' (Mo,184). The strong physical sense of the present which Molloy reveals is absent for Moran, who only indicates his present existence outside the mental world wherein his fiction is created in rather vague terms: 'Mais ce soir, ce matin, j'ai bu un peu plus que d'habitude et je peux être d'un autre avis demain' (Mo,204) -- and here he might well be merging with the implied author.<sup>1</sup>

The temporal level of fictional creation serves, in both narratives, to provide a chronology which can include all the novel's material. It is at this level that Molloy's account of the problem of rotating his sucking stones unfolds in time, or Moran's absurd list of theological questions,<sup>2</sup> so that such matters no longer have the extraneous appearance they occasionally had in Murphy and frequently in Watt, when unrelated to the prevailing temporal order -- cf. Murphy's game of chess (M,165-7), or the notation of frogs croaking in Watt (W,135-7).<sup>3</sup> This is true to such an extent that narration of the sucking-stones episode actually reverts to the present tense in its closing stages:

<sup>1</sup> Cf. The speaker in Comment c'est: 'comme lorsque pris exceptionnellement de boisson à l'heure des bouars m'obstinant à vouloir sortir de l'ascenseur je me prends le pied entre palier et cage' (CC,46).

<sup>2</sup> See Mo,105-111 and Mo,258-259 respectively.

<sup>3</sup> The narrator in Mercier et Camier incorporated lists and summaries similar to Moran's (MC,34 & 117-8), but, owing to his position external to the time-scheme, they intrude as in Watt or Murphy and are not integrated as here.

'Bon. Maintenant je peux commencer à sucer' (Mo,109), stamping it with the reality of a fictional present rather than an historical past.

Where Molloy's sense of the present is strong, his sense of the past is extremely confused, as befits his belief that 'Dire c'est inventer' (Mo,46). The historicity of his past is both irrelevant and dubious, so that it does not matter if it is a composite of different moments in time and imaginary moments, and his mock-distress at the possible gap of fifteen days in 'l'enchaînement si rigoureux d'incidents dont je venais de faire les frais' (Mo,62) can only be taken as a joke in view of the actual disorder in the narrative: 'Et voilà comment débuta cette seconde journée, à moins que ce ne fût la troisième ou la quatrième' (Mo,42), 'Je dis cette nuit, mais il y en eut plusieurs peut-être' (Mo,40). If sometimes the past is thus compressed, at others it is distended, so that, while the whole narrative is ostensibly located in the cycle of one year, the stay at Lousse's house is undefined temporally -- 'c'est vague, un bon moment, quelques mois peut-être, une année peut-être. Je sais qu'il faisait à nouveau chaud le jour de mon départ, mais cela ne voulait rien dire' (Mo,76); indeed it has an atemporal quality -- 'comme dans une cage hors du temps' (Mo,77) -- reminiscent of Watt's stay in Mr. Knott's house. The past for Molloy has no validity except insofar as it can become part of the present through fictional creation; hence the temporal confusion

which prevents it from assuming a reality outwith the creative mind, thereby emphasising the immediacy of the act of literary creation. For Molloy the past assumes a static quality, it becomes a directionless chaos piled up in the mind where such words as beginning and ending lose all temporal sense: 'Voici mon commencement à moi.... C'était le commencement, vous comprenez. Tandis que c'est presque la fin, à présent' (Mo,8).

Moran, on the other hand, for whom the present is not so active, has a clear sense of the chronology of the past, in keeping with his preoccupation with appearances -- as illusory for Molloy as the sense of a temporally ordered universe. Like Molloy, Moran locates his narrative within the cycle of one year; but for him the essential anonymity of moments in cyclical time causes no conscious confusion: 'Je me rappelle le jour où je reçus l'ordre de m'occuper de Molloy. C'était un dimanche d'été' (Mo,142), and he does not share Molloy's doubts as to the relationship between felt time and external time. His whole narrative is carefully related to the chronology of a single year: 'Je reçus l'ordre de rentrer en août, en septembre au plus tard. J'arrivai chez moi au printemps' (Mo,256). And if he condenses here and extends there by virtue of his selective process, he never shows any doubt as to the order of events: 'Première faute. Deuxième, première dans le temps, j'avais omis d'enjoindre à mon fils de ne rien répéter à personne' (Mo,162). His confidence in a temporally ordered universe can only seem self-



deceptive after Molloy's revelations, however, and is as likely to be as misplaced as his confidence in his knowledge of the Ballyba terrain which proved so false. For Moran too the past, as it is conceived in the present, is static, and need not be revealed in a continuous movement. The underlying time-scale of the creative consciousness permits spatial treatment of a subject, which disrupts the temporal flow, without upsetting narrative continuity; his cigar, for instance:

Mon cigare s'était éteint ... Je le secouai et le mis dans ma poche, avec l'intention de le jeter dans le cendrier, ou dans la corbeille à papier, plus tard. Mais le lendemain, loin de Shit, je le retrouvai dans ma poche et ma foi non sans satisfaction.... Découvrir le cigare froid entre mes dents, le cracher, le chercher, ... me demander ce qu'il convenait d'en faire, ... ce n'étaient là que les principaux relais d'un processus que je fis durer un quart d'heure au moins. D'autres avaient trait au chien Zoulou (Mo,189);

and the subject is completed later on with the same temporal confusion: 'Le premier jour je trouvai le mégot du cigare ... Non seulement je ne l'avais pas jeté, dans le cendrier, dans la corbeille à papier, mais je l'avais mis dans ma poche en changeant de costume. Cela s'était passé à mon insu. Je le regardai avec étonnement' (Mo,209).

The temporal sequence of both narratives must ultimately be seen as a matter of convenience rather than necessity, since it is clear that they originate in the timeless world of the mind rather than the time-bound external world. The time in which they unfold, fundamentally, is that which it takes to write them down, and their temporal structure in the past is purely conventional -- imposed not inherent. Moran explains the position:



'Ce que j'affirme, nie, mets en doute, au présent, je peux le faire encore aujourd'hui. Mais j'emploierai surtout les diverses formes du passé. Car le plus souvent je ne suis pas sûr' (Mo,162-3). There is no trace here of the irrevocability of historical time. As Watt already hinted, verbal tenses and felt time are poorly related. Molloy finds language unsuited to the task of expressing his sense of the weight of the past involved in the present: 'Ma vie, ma vie ... elle est finie et elle dure à la fois, mais par quel temps du verbe exprimer cela?' (Mo,53).<sup>1</sup> The lack of relationship between language and reality is suggested by underlining the artificiality of the novel's chronology, where distinctions between fictional past and present are shown to be arbitrary: 'Je parle au présent. Il est si facile de parler au présent quand il s'agit du passé. C'est le présent mythologique, n'y faites pas attention' (Mo,37).<sup>2</sup> Molloy is sufficiently aware of the basic meaninglessness of temporal distinctions to play on their ambiguity: 'Cela ne m'avait pas paru étrange alors. Mais alors cela me parut étrange' (Mo,140). The insecurity of the novel's temporal structure is reflected in the fact that the sequence in which we re-create it, by reading

<sup>1</sup> Here a simple notion in Mercier et Camier is enriched by the added dimension of self-conscious creation: cf. 'C'est un fait, la journée est finie longtemps avant de finir et les hommes tombent de fatigue bien avant l'heure du repos' (MC,128).

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately too much attention has been paid to the phrase, which is surely at the origin of the use of the word "mythological" to describe Molloy, denying his flesh and blood. But it is clearly used here to describe inward-oriented man, the atemporality of his mind -- a mode of existence which does not in any way deny humanity

it, differs even from that in which the writer claims to have written it, since the time-scale of the creative consciousness which organises the work sets the opening lines we read on page 7 chronologically later than the writer's intended opening lines, not given until page 9. In addition to the uncertain temporal order must be noted the lack of chronological relationship between the two sections of the book. Two separate consciousness guarantee internal cohesion in each; but to find an overall unity in time we must go to the temporal plane of the implied author. In the fictional chronology, the only evidence of continuity between the two parts is circumstantial, in the presence of the shepherd and his dog in both narratives. Ludovic Janvier holds that 'Le temps de Moran précède donc celui de Molloy, ou plutôt Moran et Molloy sont deux instants consécutifs d'un seul devenir',<sup>1</sup> but this is based on the theory that Moran is the predecessor of Molloy, and not on temporal evidence. Again this points to the implied author's responsibility for the similarities in the two heroes and their narratives. The result is that, although it is the consciousness of the narrators that dominates and not that of the overall creator, the hint of an additional temporal level, an added frame in the fictional planes, is constantly to be felt.

#### X. The Thematic Factor

In the absence of plot or pattern of events, thematic structuring is of vital importance in Molloy, since it gives the

<sup>1</sup> Janvier, p.58.

book shape and coherence not developed in the action. This novel is bound together by what Eugene Falk describes as 'generic thematic coherence', being the 'reciprocal relatedness of themes independent of probable sequence and causal coherence'.<sup>1</sup> The fundamental quest theme has here become a quest for awareness of the conditions and nature of being, achieved through fictional creation. The quest is now become that of the creative consciousness and not simply that of the fictional hero. Although emphasis and proportions differ, both parts of the novel are patterned by the same thematic contrasts as underly all Beckett's work: movement and stasis, introversion and extroversion, truth and illusion -- now also become the opposition of fiction and fact, flux and stability. Since the emphasis, in Molloy, is on the act rather than the result of fictional creation, it is easier to consider its thematic structure in temporal rather than spatial terms, i.e. as rhythm rather than pattern. It is the fluctuation between these antithetical motifs which establishes the novel's basic rhythm, while the persistent recurrence of themes arising from the fundamental scepticism dictating the terms of awareness relates that rhythm to a single vision; the form of the novel may thus be seen as reflecting the mode of being of Beckettian man.

Molloy, the first of Beckett's self-conscious author-heroes, is clearly attempting to reflect the rhythm of existence in his

<sup>1</sup> Types of Thematic Structure, p.8.



narrative, and he does so in terms of movement and stasis:

mes déplacements ne devaient rien aux endroits qu'ils faisaient disparaître, mais ... ils étaient dus à autre chose, à la roue voilée qui me portait, par d'imprévisibles saccades, de fatigue en repos, et inversement, par exemple. Mais à présent je n'erre plus, nulle part, et même je ne bouge presque pas, et pourtant rien n'est changé.... Et le cycle continue, cahotant, des fuites et bivouacs, dans une Egypte sans bornes, sans enfant et sans mère (Mo,99-100).

moi je restais là où j'étais, à regret, mais modérément. Car en moi il y a toujours eu deux pitres, entre autres, celui qui ne demande qu'à rester là où il se trouve et celui qui s' imagine qu'il serait un peu moins mal plus loin.... Et je leur cédaï à tour de rôle, à ces tristes compères, pour leur permettre de comprendre leur erreur (Mo,72).

Molloy helps to establish the novel's rhythm by switching back and forth between the movement of his search and the stasis of his present condition, and within the story itself between journeys -- on his bicycle, in the forest -- and halts -- with Lousse, at the beach; even his mode of walking comprises both elements: 'ma progression m'obligeait à m'arrêter de plus en plus souvent, c'était le seul moyen de progresser, m'arrêter' (Mo,120). The fluctuating rhythm is further accentuated by alterations in the speed of the temporal flow -- cf. Molloy's 'cage hors du temps' (Mo,77) and Moran's 'il me semblait me voir vieillir à une vitesse d'éphémère' (Mo,230) -- and sudden shifts in perspective from dramatic immediacy to the distance of panoramic vision -- e.g. Molloy's 'quand je me courbe sur cette période' (Mo,77), or Moran's 'il faudrait bientôt m'avouer que j'étais anxieux' (Mo,149). Moran's narrative rests on the same oscillating rhythm: we start with his setting out on his journey by foot, then his three-day



wait for his son, his bicycle travels, followed by his paralysed abandonment, his journey back, his stay at home, and we end with his stated intention to set out again. A delicate counterpointing is achieved through intermingling the elements in the course of the novel, as in Molloy's mode of progression, or his movement in Lousse's motionless house: 'Je crois que j'occupai plusieurs chambres, l'une après l'autre, ou par alternance' (Mo,77); Moran too moves in the stillness of his house: 'Je bougeais sans arrêt dans mon fauteuil' (Mo,149), 'Je ne faisais qu'aller et venir' (Mo,168) -- the last reference being recalled during his wait for his son: 'je consumai la plus grande partie de cette seconde journée dans ces vaines allées et venues' (Mo,229); on his bicycle journey, however: 'Je pensais beaucoup à moi, en route assis derrière mon fils, ... et au campement pendant qu'il allait et venait' (Mo,245).

On an abstract level this rhythm is repeated. Both narrators alternate their centres of attention between self and non-self, between the flux of consciousness which is truth and the stability of a verbalised world which is illusion. For Molloy, being is consciousness, and consciousness is flux: 'ces choses penchées glissant dans un éboulement sans fin' (Mo,59). Once consciousness becomes conscious of itself, however, it must be conceived of as a flow of words, and objects from the visible world, as Watt already discovered, are unrelated to language; thus, for Molloy: 'Ramener le silence, c'est le rôle des objets'

(Mo,17), and the familiar, accessible object is a fiction: 'C'était une bicyclette acatène, à roue libre, si cela existe'(Mo,21). The reasoning mind imposes stability on the world which the absolute subjectivity of impressionistic vision belies: 'La chambre, par contre, je la voyais mal, chaque fois que j'en reprenais l'inspection elle me paraissait changée, et cela s'appelle mal voir dans l'état actuel de nos connaissances' (Mo,65). In this state of heightened self-awareness, felt life, isolated from the external world, seems a dream, a mental creation which only consciousness can maintain in existence: 'il faut faire attention ... n'importe quoi qui vous empêche de perdre le fil du songe' (Mo,73-4). Moran, on the other hand, clings desperately to the belief that he is 'un solide, parmi d'autres solides'(Mo,167), brushing aside his sensations of reality as chaos as being 'illusoires' (Mo,171), yet likening them to a momentary awakening to the pain of living which the sleeper dubs nightmare and returns to his dreams. His change in self-awareness is described as 'cette sensation qui de sombre et massive, de grinçante et pierreuse, se faisait soudain liquide' (Mo,230), showing quite plainly that Beckett is using these motifs to reflect a mode of being. In this novel, then, we have a highly complex use of thematic contrasts: the two sections of the novel are related through the recurrence of motifs yet symmetrically opposed through the different combinations used to reveal the conflicting attitudes of the two protagonists.

Uncertainty, a conscious policy for Molloy and a dreaded

invasion for Moran, is the most pervasive theme in the novel. Where for Watt it was a state to be deplored and if possible rectified, for Molloy it becomes the fundamental premise of existence: 'Car ne rien savoir, ce n'est rien, ne rien vouloir savoir non plus, mais ne rien pouvoir savoir, savoir ne rien pouvoir savoir, voilà par où passe la paix, dans l'âme du chercheur incurieux' (Mo, 96). Clarity of thought is equated with falsehood: 'je crois que tout ce qui est faux se laisse davantage réduire, en notions claires et distinctes' (Mo, 125). Positive statement is avoided wherever possible, and where made is soon denied: 'Elle me semblait loin, ma mère ... et cependant j'en étais un peu plus proche que la nuit précédente, si mes calculs étaient exacts. Mais l'étaient-ils? ... Si ... j'étais dans une autre ville ... alors j'avais perdu du terrain' (Mo, 57); 'Lousse était une femme extraordinairement plate ... à tel point que je me demande encore ce soir ... si elle n'était pas plutôt un homme ou tout au moins un androgyne' (Mo, 84). For Molloy, then, the elements of his narrative are exploited to reveal the theme of uncertainty, as indeed is the manner of narration: 'je ne savais qu'à l'avance, car sur le moment je ne savais plus, on l'aura peut-être remarqué ... et après coup je ne savais plus non plus, je retrouvais l'ignorance' (Mo, 126). Moran presents his past or fictional self as refusing to admit uncertainty: 'retenant sa pensée dans les limites du calcul tellement il a horreur de l'incertain' (Mo, 176); yet deceived by certainty: 'tirant froidement



mes plans, pour le lendemain, le surlendemain, créant le temps à venir. Et j'oubliais alors que mon fils serait à mes côtés, s'agitant, se plaignant, réclamant à manger' (Mo,194) -- where neither plans nor stated omission turn out to represent the truth. Gradually he is obliged to abandon his assurance as doubts force their way into his consciousness: 'la douleur revint ... mais moins forte ... Ou me paraissait-elle moins forte seulement parce que je m'y attendais? Ou parce que je commençais déjà à m'y habituer?' (Mo,214), 'Je parle toujours de mon genou. Mais était-ce le même qui m'avait réveillé au début de la nuit?' (Mo,215). In his role as narrator, Moran's acceptance of uncertainty is inseparable from Molloy's: 'le plus souvent je ne suis pas sûr, ce n'est peut-être plus ainsi, je ne sais pas encore, ne sais pas tout court, ne saurai peut-être jamais' (Mo,163).

The question of language-failure which was of primary importance to Watt becomes, in Molloy, one aspect of the pervading scepticism. It is still, however, a very important one, since the novel must depend for its existence on words, and it is the unreliability of these words which casts doubt on the nature of the written work. Molloy, as the more self-conscious writer, is more preoccupied with the problem of the relationship between language and reality. As successor to Watt, he has no illusions: 'Et cette ville ... j'en cherchai le nom, dans ma mémoire ... Il y avait si longtemps que je vivais loin des mots ... qu'il me



suffisait de voir ma ville ... pour ne pas pouvoir, vous comprenez. C'est trop difficile à dire pour moi' (Mo,45). Language cannot create a living reality, only a fiction: 'J'en sais ce que savent les mots et les choses mortes et ça fait une jolie petite somme, avec un commencement, un milieu et une fin, comme dans les phrases bien bâties et dans la longue sonate des cadavres' (Mo,46) -- its organisational qualities distort and destroy. For both heroes language fails utterly as a means of communication. We witness Molloy's difficulties with the commissaire, recalling Watt's troubles buying his ticket at the end of his story;<sup>1</sup> and he explains later that

les mots que j'entendais, ... je les entendais la première fois, ... et souvent jusqu'à la troisième, comme des sons purs, libres de toute signification ... Et les mots que je prononçais moi-même et qui devaient presque toujours se rattacher à un effort de l'intelligence, souvent ils me faisaient l'effet d'un bourdonnement d'insecte (Mo,74-5).

His query about the sheep's fate, addressed to the shepherd, goes unheard or un-understood: 'soit qu'il ne comprît pas, soit qu'il ne voulût pas répondre, il ne répondit pas ... il parla à son chien qui l'écouta attentivement' (Mo,41). The extreme difficulties experienced by Moran in trying to get his son to understand

<sup>1</sup> Again Mercier et Camier takes a slight step backwards; in the encounter with the keeper, so similar to Molloy's with the commissaire, if Camier fails to understand -- 'Comprends-tu quelque chose à ces propos incohérents?' (MC,20) -- Mercier can explain. And even towards the end of the narrative there are only certain matters difficult of expression: 'Je ne connais pas le mot, dit Mercier, ni même la phrase, capable d'exprimer ce que nous croyons être en train de vouloir faire' (MC,140).

him are emphasised by his irony: 'Il avait l'air plutôt stupéfait ... As-tu compris au moins? dis-je. Que ça fait du bien de temps en temps, un peu de vraie conversation' (Mo,218). By the time of his encounter with the shepherd and his sheep, communication has become extraordinarily difficult: 'je ne savais comment j'allais pouvoir rompre ce silence ... Je dis finalement, Ballyba, ... Le berger ôta la pipe de sa bouche et en dirigea le tuyau vers le sol ... J'avais compris, mais sans en avoir l'air probablement, car il renouvela son geste' (Mo,246).<sup>1</sup> By the time of his meeting with Gaber, they can hardly hear one another not to mention understanding: 'Qu'est-ce qu'il vous a dit? dis-je. Je ne comprends pas, dit Gaber.... Il m'a dit, dit Gaber, il m'a --. Plus fort, m'écriai-je' (Mo,255). If most of Moran's narrative presents Moran-the-hero as falsely convinced he can communicate with others, disillusionment only gradually descending, from the start he entertains some suspicion of words: 'Il me semblait que tout langage est un écart de langage' (Mo,179).

The theme of the absence of meaning and values in life is closely allied to that of the identification of opposites or

<sup>1</sup> Inspiration for the scene where the sheep are upset by Moran's approach -- 'peu à peu, les uns après les autres, ils se tournaient vers moi, me faisaient face, me regardaient venir. Seuls quelques brefs mouvements de recul, une maigre patte frappant le sol, trahissaient leur trouble' (Mo,245) -- seems to have come from Mercier et Camier, when Mercier's entrance into a cafe upsets those present: 'Un observateur ... aurait pensé peut-être à un troupeau de moutons, ou de bufles, mis en émoi par un danger obscur' (MC,136-7).

ultimate sameness of things.<sup>1</sup> For Molloy, life is a meaningless mess, without design or meaning: 'Et si je me suis toujours conduit comme un cochon, la faute n'en est pas à moi, mais à mes supérieurs, qui me corrigeaient seulement sur des points de détail au lieu de me montrer l'essence du système' (Mo,35). Thus life, which for him is equated with verbalisation of experience, is essentially meaningless: 'on ferait mieux, enfin, aussi bien, d'effacer les textes que de noircir les marges, de les boucher jusqu'à ce que tout soit blanc et lisse et que la connerie prenne son vrai visage, un non-sens cul et sans issue' (Mo,17); 'quoi que je fasse, c'est-à-dire quoi que je dise, ce sera toujours en quelque sorte la même chose ... Et si je parle de principes, alors qu'il n'y en a pas, je n'y peux rien' (Mo,68). And sameness in creative activity brings, as we have seen, the problem of how to give the impression of variety: 'Et si toutes les merdes se ressemblent, ce qui n'est pas vrai, ça ne fait rien, ça fait du bien de changer de merde' (Mo,61). Opposites merge continuously for him, causing endless confusion: 'Je confonds est et ouest, les pôles aussi, je les intervertis volontiers' (Mo,27), 'Je distingue mal entre chiens bâtards et de race' (Mo,51), 'Les pleurs et les ris, je ne m'y connais guère' (Mo,54), or, with amusing word play: 'ayant une mauvaise jambe et puis une autre, à peu près bonne, je pouvais ménager celle-là, et en réduire les souffrances

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Beckett's expression of his attitude to truth: 'What is more true than anything else? To swim is true, and to sink is true. One is not more true than the other. One cannot speak anymore of being, one must speak only of the mess' ('Beckett by the Madeleine', pp.22-23 -- speaking to Tom F. Driver).



au minimum, au maximum' (Mo,118). Moran, while preoccupied with the façade of existence, arbitrarily imposes values: 'il suffisait d'un carrefour ... pour qu'il [son fils] s'écartât du bon chemin, celui que j'avais élu' (Mo,198); but once he starts to probe beneath the surface, values and distinctions become meaningless: 'Des qu'il y a deux choses à peu près pareilles je m'y perds' (Mo,242). He knows it is man's nature to impose meanings as he does with his bees' dance: 'j'en avait classé un grand nombre, avec leur signification probable' (Mo,261), but by the time of his return journey this has become a game only: 'Et que cette danse ne fût pas au fond autre chose que celle des occidentaux, frivole et sans signification, j'en admettais sans broncher la possibilité. Mais pour moi ... ce serait toujours une chose belle à regarder et d'une portée que n'arriveraient jamais à souiller mes raisonnements d'homme malgré lui' (Mo,262-3). And if we relate Moran's attitude to the creative process, we arrive at Malone's starting-point -- artistic activity as play.

## XI. Repetition

Linking phrases and images are used to draw the two parts of the novel together and to relate them to the main body of Beckett's work, as well as to outline the structure, connect themes and contrast attitudes. Molloy informs us that he has 'l'ouïe assez fine' (Mo,30), with two later reminders (Mo,42 & 74), and Moran likewise claims: 'J'ai l'oreille d'une grande finesse'



(Mo,197-8), establishing a point of contact between the two protagonists. But Molloy relates his comments to his estrangement from the external world -- he cannot understand what he hears -- drawing also on the sense of sight: 'Et mon oeil aussi, le bon, devait être mal relié à l'araignée, car je nommais difficilement ce qui s'y reflétait' (Mo,75), while Moran is boasting of his ability to interpret sounds: 'Je perçus cet adorable bruit fait de menus piétinements, de plumes nerveuses ...' (Mo,198). In Moran's narrative, Marthe echoes the senses motif: 'Je ne suis pas aveugle, dit-elle ... Malheureusement' (Mo,181), showing a Murphy-like desire for isolation; and by the end Gaber's weakened senses suggest the monadic solitude of the heroes to come: 'Je ne vois rien, dit-il ... Je n'entends pas un mot de ce que vous dites' (Mo,252-3).<sup>1</sup> Molloy's efforts to give reasons for his search for his mother recall Watt's major obsession with reasons, he even echoes Watt's turn of speech: 'La raison de cette ordonnance est je crois la suivante....' (Mo,27). Molloy and Moran actually use the same phrases: 'C'est ainsi que je raisonne' (Mo,125 & 170), 'Ce n'est pas le mot' (Mo,92 & 257), and draw on the same cliché: Molloy -- 'Je n'étais pas dans mon assiette. Elle est profonde, mon assiette, ... et il est rare que je n'y sois pas' (Mo,27) -- and Moran -- 'C'est donc moi qui ne suis pas dans mon assiette, dis-je' (Mo,179)<sup>2</sup> -- and not surprisingly Marthe

<sup>1</sup> The motifs refer discreetly back to Watt, where both Sam and Watt use weakened senses to indicate communication difficulties -- see W,167 & 202.

<sup>2</sup> This first appears, less masterfully exploited, in Mercier et Camier: 'L'heure est grave et Mercier n'est pas dans son assiette' (MC,47), and recurs in Malone Meurt: 'tout semblait indiquer que Moll n'était pas dans son assiette' (MM,173).

fails to understand the reference. Molloy's agent and Gaber both suffer from thirst;<sup>1</sup> a gong is sounded in Molloy's forest and Moran's house; Molloy steals a nameless object from Lousse which Moran names without difficulty: 'jouant avec le porte-couteau' (Mo,179).<sup>2</sup>

At the simplest level, repetition is used in Molloy for tonal purposes. Recurring words, phrases and sentence structures denote the narrators' scepticism: "et" and "mais" are the most popular connectives, supported by a not very causal "car", indicative of the incoherence of the novel's world. "Je ne sais pas", "je crois", "je ne crois pas", and the ubiquitous "peut-être" are Molloy's favourite phrases, and occur with greater frequency as Moran's narrative progresses. Both heroes have a weakness for the unanswered question. Molloy has a curious habit of repeating himself -- later to be taken up by Moran -- suggesting boredom with his tale: 'Le temps délicieux, délicieux' (Mo,43), where the word is repeated for want of something else to say, or used as a point of departure: 'Alors je m'habillai ... je mis mon pantalon, mon manteau ... et mes chaussures. Mes chaussures. Elles me montaient jusque là où j'aurais eu des mollets si j'avais eu des mollets' (Mo,69). Repetitions and echoes are endless, not only serving tonal ends but, as we have seen, fulfilling the formal function of creating symmetry and establishing thematic connections between the two sections. Above all, however, they

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Cooper's insatiable thirst in Murphy, also the go-between.

<sup>2</sup> Significantly the gong and the kniferest, in Molloy's impressionistic narrative, are unrelated to context, where the logical Moran sets them in suitable surroundings.

point to a central consciousness responsible for the novel as a whole -- a third level of reality to be taken into account when considering the book as a unit. For it is the mind of the implied author, who creates the two narrators, that establishes the essential unity of Molloy; and this mind is most insistently pointed to by the use of repetition, indicating a single centre of consciousness, as it did in Watt, and setting this novel in the perspective of Beckett's oeuvre through inter-work reference.

## XII. Conclusion

The confinement to first-person narration in Molloy makes the role of the hidden author much more difficult to ascertain than in Murphy, or even Watt. Since Molloy assumes full responsibility for his narrative we do not have the ambiguities of origin of earlier novels; nonetheless, our relationship with him is distinctly uneasy. The presence of Sam, in Watt, permitted us to remain outside the hero's experience, but in Molloy we are forced either to share it or to reject the good faith of the narrator. Ironical distance is achieved periodically through our superior knowledge -- due to having access to the whole text where Molloy only knows what is on the page before him -- but it allows no sense of security, since facts and figures are in any event of absolutely no value; thus, ultimately, the irony turns against us. Molloy's most obviously ironic remarks put us in a quandary,



since we cannot be sure whether the irony is conscious or not: 'Ce qui est certain, c'est que jamais plus je ne me suis reposé de cette façon, les pieds obscènement posés par terre, les bras sur le guidon et sur les bras la tête, abandonnée et brimbalante. C'était en effet un triste spectacle, et un triste exemple, pour les citadins' (Mo,35), 'Un jeu de con à mon avis ... Mais je m'y prêtais d'assez bonne grâce, sachant que c'était l'amour, car elle me l'avait dit' (Mo,85). It is possible, of course, that Molloy is simply naïve, in which case the irony is directed by the implied author with whom we relate directly in sharing a sense of superiority over the hero; but when we consider that subjectivity and doubt are the conscious conditions of the narrator's vision, it seems more likely that he is fully aware of the irony of his remarks. Insofar as the narrative is the record of a mode of experiencing life, reader, hero and implied author are therefore closely associated. The points on which we can clearly dissociate ourselves and the hidden creator from the protagonist -- physical attributes, unmotivated violence, external events undergone -- are in any event least essential to the novel. Molloy could easily say, with the hero of 'L'expulsé': 'Je ne sais pas pourquoi j'ai raconté cette histoire. J'aurais pu tout aussi bien en raconter une autre' (NTPR,40). As in Watt, it is how one experiences that counts here, and not what is experienced. And Molloy gives us no grounds for rejecting his vision, since he makes no claims for the relation of his account



to an objective reality. His critical self-awareness means that his vision is ironic and he therefore transcends his narrative, encouraging us to share his scepticism concerning the validity of narrative content. In philosophical terms, of course, this must be seen as man transcending the human condition through consciousness: 'savoir ne rien pouvoir savoir' (Mo,96).<sup>1</sup>

The question of Moran is slightly different, since our reaction to him is undoubtedly conditioned by Molloy. We tend to view his account with Molloy's ironic vision, and so immediately set ourselves above his superficial world. (The readers of Murphy would, of course, be encouraged to take this view.) It is only when Moran reveals that he is himself responsible, as narrator, for the dramatic irony in the treatment of himself as hero -- 'Car c'est une des caractéristiques de ce pensum qu'il ne m'est pas permis de brûler les étapes et de dire tout de go de quoi il s'agit. Mais je dois ignorer à nouveau ce que je n'ignore plus et croire savoir ce [que]...je croyais savoir' (Mo,205) -- that we are obliged to revise our attitude. In his present state of awareness he knows quite as well as we that statements such as 'Mais outre que j'allais avoir d'autres rôles à jouer ... que celui de surveillant ou de garde-malade, la perspective de ne pouvoir faire un pas sans avoir sous les yeux ce petit corps maussade et dodu m'était intolérable' (Mo,200) are superbly ironic. Since his fiction concerns a mode of being that is past and done

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Beckett's words to Tom F. Driver: 'The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess' ('Beckett by the Madeleine', p.22).

with, and was in any event self-deceptive, rather than an existing state as with Molloy, the reader identifies himself less closely with Moran. As hero, Moran's way of seeing is invalid, and, as narrator, his mode of being is not sufficiently in evidence for the reader to identify clearly with him. It is thus more possible for the implied author to make his presence felt in the second part of the book than the first. We are more inclined to attribute the irony of 'Et le soir, quand je me promenais ... en dehors de Shit, c'est le frais de Shitbaba que je prenais, et nul autre' (Mo, 207) to the bilingual Beckett than Moran; and we may even wonder if Moran is not being completely taken over by the hidden author when he remarks: 'Quelle tourbe dans ma tête, quelle galerie de crevés. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier et tant d'autres.... Des histoires, des histoires. Je n'ai pas su les raconter' (Mo, 212-3), since such a remark is undoubtedly more appropriate to the overall consciousness, responsible for all the novels, than to the fictional Moran. It does, however, also suggest that, if Molloy is the embodiment of artistic being, Moran is the organising artisan, both facets of the hidden author. All this encourages the feeling that it is Molloy's vision that dominates in the novel, rather than Moran's; and this is perfectly acceptable, since Molloy is wholly concerned with what man is, while Moran is more preoccupied with the rejection of what he is not.

It is the reader's inability to protect himself from the novel's

destructive vision that causes his basic uneasiness. The fictional nature of the narrative is never disguised, even the fictional nature of its protagonists is finally revealed -- since Molloy is subjected to Moran's authorship, and Moran is dominated by the implied author -- yet the reader cannot reject the way of seeing portrayed. This is brought about through the introduction in Molloy of the emphasis on the very act of creative writing. From now on the novels must be seen as concerned not just with the sceptical vision of twentieth-century man, but with that of the twentieth-century artist. Through focusing attention on the artistic act, which entails an attempt to verbalise consciousness, the reader is made aware of his own consciousness, and it is the organising act of understanding, of self-consciousness, that distorts and falsifies. Awareness of being, by the very act of awareness, transforms being into a fiction. Paradoxically, subjective truth entails objective fiction. Thus, through portraying verbalised consciousness as a fiction, Beckett is nonetheless scrupulously abiding by his understanding of the truth.<sup>1</sup> Molloy and Moran both know they are incapable of expressing reality -- Moran's final denial 'Il n'était pas minuit. Il ne pleuvait pas' (Mo, 272) puts him in undoubted agreement with Molloy's 'Dire c'est inventer' (Mo, 46) -- yet both, as creative artists, feel themselves under an inexplicable compulsion to continue writing. Self-consciousness, once aroused, is an

<sup>1</sup> Josephine Jacobsen and William R. Mueller, in The Testament of Samuel Beckett (New York 1964), see Beckett's fidelity to his truth as one of his highest achievements.



unconquerable urge, and for the artist it takes the form of an incessant drive into speech; the self-conscious artist explores being through artistic creation.

Molloy, in his narrative, explores a mode of existence isolated from external reality; and Moran discards the shell of personality in an effort to reach his true self. Malone, the hero of the next novel, will reach an even deeper level of awareness, resulting in more complex notions of being and self. He will come to realise that, if consciousness has no guaranteed objective validity, there is no reason why it should not create divers versions of reality instead of the single version offered by Molloy; and he will find that the level of selfhood uncovered by Moran is also multiple and far from the true anonymity of the recording "I" which he will attempt to reach. Where in Molloy a hidden creator formed the bond between the protagonists, who were ultimately revealed as fictional personae of an undramatised creative consciousness, Malone meurt introduces yet another frame and dramatises the author giving form to his schizophrenic vision through the conscious creation of different pseudo-selves, each with his own subjective version of the world. This will permit a more tightly-knit structure -- the existence of the hidden creator who unites the two parts in Molloy is not strongly felt. It will also give greater immediacy to the narrative by relating its present moment to the future (awaited death) rather than the past (coming to terms with experience through imaginative reconstruction) as was the case in Molloy.



CHAPTER V

M A L O N E   M E U R T

# I. Introduction

In 1961 Beckett told Gabriel d'Aubarède that his Trilogy had been written with difficulty, 'Mais avec élan, dans une sorte d'enthousiasme,' and he told him that 'Malone est sorti de Moloy [sic] L'Innommable est sorti de Malone'.<sup>1</sup> 'Eleutheria', the unpublished play intervening between Molloy and Malone meurt, must thus be seen as a brief relaxation before resumption of the battle with the written word, and not as a continuation of it. The intangibility and lawlessness of the novel give way momentarily to the theatre where, as Alain Robbe-Grillet emphasises, 'Le personnage ... est en scène, c'est sa première qualité : il est là',<sup>2</sup> and time and space are strictly delimited. The return to the novel is a renewal of the struggle with words as the sole medium for exploring the artistic experience. Malone agrees with his immediate predecessors' acceptance of the artist's paradoxical need to approach truth by means of fiction, since they

<sup>1</sup> 'En attendant Beckett', p.7.

<sup>2</sup> 'Samuel Beckett ou la présence sur la scène', Pour un nouveau roman, p.95.

see man as confined within the limits of his own consciousness, and realise that the only truth accessible to him is totally subjective and so ultimately must be seen as fiction. The latest hero, however, views the problem with greater lucidity: if truth is subjective and consciousness is flux, then the truth apprehended by a single consciousness may be multiple. If our conception of life is a fiction, then it seems a perfectly legitimate occupation to escape the tedium of living (here presented as the inevitable march towards death) by playing games with consciousness and experiencing chosen fictions on a level of existence purposely detached from all notions of external reality. Malone is no longer concerned with describing his existence simply in order to guarantee its reality; having accepted the gulf between formulated consciousness and felt life, he determines to compensate for the chaos of the latter by organising the former to meet his needs. As a self-conscious artist he is portrayed as endeavouring to meet Beckett's requirement for modern art -- 'the form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former'<sup>1</sup>-- by dramatising the contents of consciousness as he attempts to control it.

Malone meurt, as its title indicates, is the story of a man dying. Where the initial situations of the preceding novels could conceivably have been developed to conform with the

<sup>1</sup> Tom F. Driver, 'Beckett by the Madeleine', p.23.

traditional requirements of the novel, here such a possibility is virtually out of the question: a dying man, possessed of a rudimentary sense of time in which the present moment dominates and past and future fade into nothingness, is confined and isolated in a small space beyond which nothing is known for certain and within which physical movement is severely restricted. The extreme simplicity of this basic situation is balanced by the increased complexity of the sense of reality which the novel conveys. Total scepticism leads the Beckettian hero to concede the possible diversification of the nature of both observer and observed; oneness can no longer be taken for granted as a quality of the self or the Other. The 'attitude of disintegration'<sup>1</sup> which Beckett felt had led him to an impasse by the end of the Trilogy already dominates in Malone meurt, precluding the slightest suggestion of developing action or psychological evolution. Alone and inward-oriented, Malone is the embodiment of the artist as conceived by Beckett as early as 1931: 'The artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction. And art is the apotheosis of solitude. There is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication',<sup>2</sup> and as late as 1954: 'L'artiste qui joue son être est de nulle part. Et il n'a pas de frères'.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Israel Shenker, 'Moody Man of Letters', p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Proust, p.64.

<sup>3</sup> 'Hommage à Jack B. Yeats', Lettres Nouvelles, XIV (avril 1954), pp.619-620.



book is accordingly denied a social context which for many is the hall-mark of the novel: 'Le large n'est plus éclairé que par reflets, c'est sur moi que mes sens sont braqués' (MM,20-1). As the outer world contracts, the inner world expands.<sup>1</sup> Malone is a clown Narcissus, eyes turned inward from necessity not choice, an egoist whose scepticism casts doubt upon the integrity of the ego.

## II. Fictional World

The world of Malone meurt presents itself in much less concrete terms than the earlier novels, opening as it does directly on the stream of Malone's consciousness<sup>2</sup> -- occupied not with facts but with speculations, reflections and resolutions concerning his future death. This world is immediately related to preceding fictional creations, appearing as a further attempt to formulate the author's vision -- 'Cette fois je sais où je vais. Ce n'est plus la nuit de jadis, de naguère. C'est un jeu maintenant, je vais jouer' (MM,9), referring back to Molloy's 'Cette fois-ci, puis encore une je pense' (Mo,9). Malone's world too,

<sup>1</sup> Murphy offers the germ of explanation: 'But motion in this world depended on rest in the world outside. A man is in bed, wanting to sleep. A rat is behind the wall at his head, wanting to move. The man hears the rat fidget and cannot sleep, the rat hears the man fidget and dares not move. They are both unhappy, one fidgeting and the other waiting, or both happy, the rat moving and the man sleeping' (M,78); apart from the notion of happiness, Murphy's idea may be fairly applied to Malone's situation.

<sup>2</sup> Malone makes it quite clear that the full stream is not verbalised for inclusion in the narrative, so that the novel may still not be included in the "stream-of-consciousness" tradition.

then, is avowedly fiction, but where former heroes were disturbed by discrepancies between their formulations and objective reality, he deliberately cuts himself loose from it and claims the full freedom of fictional creation within the inner world of the mind. The images of consciousness become a game in which he endeavours to control them, resolving, if phenomena fail him, to use himself as a toy: 'Mais je jouerai une grande partie du temps, dorénavant ... si je peux....Je vais peut-être me trouver abandonné comme autrefois, sans jouets, sans lumière. Alors je jouerai tout seul, je ferai comme si je me voyais' (MM,10).<sup>1</sup>

The concrete environment no longer acts as a framework for this novel, in any sense. Malone's own physical situation is not recounted until page 14, and even then in most unsatisfactory terms: 'Situation présente. Cette chambre semble être à moi. Je ne m'explique pas autrement qu'on m'y laisse' (MM,14); and it is used not as a container but as a point of rebound to encourage free movement in the limitless world of the imagination:

J'ai décidé ... de me rappeler brièvement ma situation présente, avant de commencer mes histoires.... C'est une faiblesse. Mais je vais me la passer. Je jouerai avec d'autant plus d'ardeur par la suite (MM,13);

Je vais fouiller un peu dans mes affaires. Puis je mettrai la tête sous les couvertures. Ensuite ça ira mieux, pour Sapo et pour celui qui le suit (MM,31).

<sup>1</sup> The concept of life as a series of empty games is clearly developed in En attendant Godot, the writing of which follows on Malone meurt. The play's conversation game, however, has its genesis in Mercier et Camier: 'A peine l'eut-il dit qu'il se mit à le regretter ... Que regrettait-il? Il craignait que cette balle, Camier ne la lui renvoyât, l'obligeant ainsi à comprendre, et à répondre, ou à un silence inconvenant' (MC,176) -- Malone's games too prevent "un silence inconvenant".

The imagined environment of Malone's sub-fictions works more as a temporary scaffolding to be developed or dismantled at will without reference to story requirements, true to the ephemeral nature of the inner world with which any measure of stability would be incompatible. Since both inner and outer worlds are, by this stage in the Beckettian novel, acknowledged fictions, there is not the strict distinction made between them that is made in the earlier works. Malone in his bed can thus be easily objectivised in his mind's eye: 'si je ferme les yeux, les ferme vraiment ... alors quelquefois mon lit se soulève et vogue à travers les airs, au gré des remous, comme un fétu, et moi dedans' (MM,88), becoming part and parcel of the realm of imagination. Similarly, when he describes the visit he receives, or imagines he receives, he has no difficulty in distorting his world to suit the needs of the story: 'Je parle de matin et d'après-midi et de telle et telle heure, il faut se mettre à la place des gens si l'on veut absolument en parler' (MM,182).

Malone's whole horizon has shrunk enormously when compared with Molloy's. Certainly their respective situations at the moment of writing are similar, but Molloy's world opens out in a re-created past, whereas Malone's is confined to the immediate proximity of his room. The outside world has here become the 'buzzing confusion'<sup>1</sup> of which Beckett spoke to Tom F. Driver: 'peu à peu les bruits du monde ... se sont fondus en un seul,

<sup>1</sup> 'Beckett by the Madeleine', p.21.



jusqu'à ne plus être qu'un seul grand bourdonnement continu' (MM,60). Knowledge of what lies beyond the four walls is reduced to unfounded surmise:

peut-être ne suis-je qu'à l'entresol.... Je sais seulement qu'il existe des vivants au-dessus de moi et au-dessous de moi.... Peut-être après tout que je suis dans une sorte de caveau et que cet espace que je prends pour la rue n'est qu'une large tranchée où donnent d'autres caveaux. Mais ces bruits alors qui montent, ces pas qui montent vers moi? Peut-être y a-t-il d'autres caveaux encore plus profonds que le mien.... Mais ces bruits, ces pas, que je dis entendre monter vers moi, le font-ils réellement? (MM,82).

That the contraction is progressive in Malone's physical realm seems to be indicated by the fact that earlier claims as to the view from his window are already forgotten by the time these doubts overcome him: 'Je vois des toits et du ciel, un bout de rue aussi ... la lune m'est devenue familière.... Quoi encore? Les nuages. ... Et toutes sortes d'oiseaux' (MM,16-7). Even within the room there is no permanence: 'Le plancher blanchit' (MM,90), 'je vois luire aux confins de ces inquiètes ténèbres comme des ossements, ce qui n'était pas le cas jusqu'à présent, à ma connaissance, et même je me rappelle distinctement la tenture ou papier peint qui adhérerait encore aux murs par endroits' (MM,91). The subjective nature of the vision which senses this contraction is clear to Malone, however: 'Après tout cette fenêtre est ce que je veux qu'elle soit, jusqu'à un certain point ... Je remarque tout d'abord qu'elle s'est singulièrement arrondie, jusqu'à ressembler presque à un oeil de boeuf' (MM,118) -- a remark which highlights the fictional nature of the material, recalling Molloy's 'il n'y a pas de lune dans ma nuit, et si cela m'arrive de parler des



étoiles c'est par mégarde' (Mo,19). Malone's physical setting is thus deprived of any illusion of objective reality.

Where Molloy recognised the natural cycle of night and day,<sup>1</sup> the fluctuations of light and dark in Malone's room no longer seem to relate to the natural world outside: 'Bref il semble y avoir la lumière du dehors, celle des hommes qui savent que le soleil émerge à telle heure et à telle autre plonge à nouveau derrière l'horizon, et qui y comptent ... et la mienne' (MM,86). This increased alienation from the world of phenomena gives an unreal, dreamlike quality to existence already sensed by Molloy, who spoke of consciousness as 'le fil du songe' (Mo,74). Malone combines the sense of dreaming with the theme of monadic existence felt as a world within the head; only for him the loss of faith in the unity of self results in the belief that the head in which he exists need not be his own: 'Et doucement mon petit espace vrombit, à nouveau. Vous direz que c'est dans ma tête, et il me semble souvent en effet que je suis dans une tête, que ces huit, non ces six parois sont en os massif, mais de là à dire que c'est ma tête à moi, non, ça jamais' (MM,87).<sup>2</sup> Where for

<sup>1</sup> He did not conform, however, to accepted human behaviour, in that he slept while it was light and travelled in the half-light or dark (see Mo,101-2).

<sup>2</sup> The origin of the setting of the short text Bing probably is to be found in this description of the bone-white skull/room.

For the psychology-minded, this passage must suggest schizophrenia (see Christopher Ricks, 'The Roots of Samuel Beckett', The Listener, LXXII, 17 Dec. 1964, p.980; or Guy Christian Bamard, Samuel Beckett: A New Approach :1970); from the point of view of the narrative technique involved, it recalls the existence of the implied author in whose mind Malone does in fact come into being.

Molloy the gulf was between the acts of apprehending and comprehending phenomena -- 'Et mon oeil ... devait être mal relié à l'araignée, car je nommais difficilement ce qui s'y reflétait' (Mo,75) -- for Malone even initial perception raises difficulties: 'je dois regarder longuement et laisser aux choses le temps de faire le long chemin qui me sépare d'elles' (MM,119). More disillusioned than Watt, appearances suffice for Malone despite the knowledge that they are false: 'Je me suis fié aux apparences, tout en les croyant vaines' (MM,65). And, like Moran in his rare moments of truth -- 'I drown in the spray of phenomena' (T,111) -- Malone is overcome by external chaos: 'Haleter, couler, remonter, haleter, supposer, nier, affirmer, nier' (MM,65) -- and the later English version adds the word 'drown' (T,210), making more open reference to the passage quoted in the English version of Molloy.

The world in which Malone sets his sub-heroes is no more comprehensible than his own: 'Sapo aimait la nature, s'intéressait aux animaux et aux plantes ... Mais il ne savait pas regarder ces choses, les regards qu'il leur prodiguait ne lui apprenaient rien sur elles' (MM,29); the young boy is described as living 'vaincu, aveuglément, dans un monde insensé, parmi des étrangers' (MM,33). Malone states openly that Sapo's story is fiction and we witness its creation, so there can be no question of its imagined world deluding us into belief in an objective reality. Even the experience on which the storyteller draws refers back to fictional antecedents. Sapo and Murphy have gull's eyes. Sapo's 'Ces choses étranges et parfois belles, qu'il aurait toute sa vie

autour de lui ... il acceptait avec une sorte de joie de ne rien y comprendre' (MM,30) recalls Moran's 'Et je me disais, avec ravissement, Voilà une chose que je pourrai étudier toute ma vie, sans jamais la comprendre' (Mo,262). The asylums in Murphy, Watt and 'La fin' are evoked in the Institution where Macmann is finally placed. The horizons of Malone's inner world shift and expand, however, where the outer world steadily contracts. His sub-fictions even offer a grotesque parody of social reality -- the Louis family counterfeits human relationships: 'Ils étaient là, en face l'un de l'autre ... l'un parlant, l'autre écoutant, et loin l'un de ce qu'il disait, l'autre de ce qu'il entendait, et loin l'un de l'autre' (MM,70), and a stable relationship with nature: 'Mme Louis retourna à la porte, écouta, appela. Au loin le troupeau lui répondit. Elle arrive, dit-elle. Mais [sa fille] n'arriva que beaucoup plus tard' (MM,76); while Macmann's asylum, with each man isolated in his little room, 'aucun contact humain à part Lemuel qui ne demandait qu'à le voir le moins possible' (MM,197), affords a horrifying symbol of modern society as many see it, showing man as isolated in social reality as he is in Beckett's interiorised reality. The humanistic vision of the world -- Mr. Hackett's, for instance, in Watt -- meets with nothing but sarcasm: the leaves falling around Macmann may indicate Autumn rather than Spring -- 'Maintenant que les hommes et les bêtes n'ont plus besoin d'ombre ... ni les oiseaux de nids où pondre et couvrir ... Et à Macmann cela est sans doute égal que



ce soit le printemps ou l'automne, à moins qu'il ne préfère l'été à l'hiver ou inversement' (MM,107); and poor Mme Pédale's view of life is revealed, basically, as being as solipsistic as any -- 'à qui la vie avait souri ou mieux, pour employer sa propre expression, rendu son sourire, en l'amplifiant, à la manière d'un miroir convexe ou concave, je ne sais pas' (MM,202).

The mental and physical domains of Malone's world have clearly much in common in that both exclude the possibility of understanding or relating to surroundings and fellow human beings.<sup>1</sup> The main difference between the two domains lies in the freedom with which they are developed. Molloy, in attempting to formulate his way of seeing, took great pains to ensure that the world in which he set himself achieved no real substance, by continuously retracting all positive statement about it. Malone, who wishes to escape from 'le sérieux' which made Molloy embrace 'l'informe et l'inarticulé, les hypothèses incurieuses, l'obscurité, la longue marche les bras en avant, la cachette' (MM,10), does so by reducing the extension of his physical surroundings to the minimum and ignoring them as much as possible. If they fluctuate and change just as his predecessor's did, they do not occupy his attention to the same degree, since much of his time is spent oblivious to them, fully occupied with his general reflections or his fictional creations. And the stories, because

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, where the French text suggests a difference in the reality of the room and the contrasting setting of Malone's fictions, when he speaks of leaving the former, 'encore au monde mal fermé' (MM,119), for the latter, the English text omits the qualifying phrase, perhaps because it seemed too positive an assertion, or because it hints at a preference for the inner world incompatible with the protagonist's resolution to be 'neutre et inerte' (MM,8).

he makes it clear that they are stories only, can be developed at will against a background that shifts from cottage to farmhouse, from busy port to indeterminate countryside -- to be interrupted by a view of himself, confined, leaving his room and passing down stairs -- from the confines of the asylum to the limitless reaches of the sea, without any fear of their laying false claims to objective reality.

### III. The Hero

In Malone meurt man is examined in isolation and not as part of the body of mankind -- the role in which the traditional novel casts him. The notion of character, with its emphasis on distinguishing features, is therefore no longer strictly relevant; since Malone does not come into contact with other human beings<sup>1</sup> -- even if his visitor is real, there is no contact between the two -- the need for a means of identifying him and setting him apart from other men is obviated. Beckett is not so much interested in the incidental characteristics which individualise people as in that which they have in common, their human nature; as Malone says when identifying Macmann: 'n'importe quels vestiges de chair et de conscience font l'affaire, ce n'est pas la peine de pister les gens. Du moment que c'est encore ce qu'on appelle un vivant il n'y a pas à se tromper, c'est le coupable' (MM, 161-2). The novels probe progressively deeper beneath the surface of their

<sup>1</sup> His very name puns on solitude: M-alone.

protagonists, and the more they emphasise the inner being the less they attend to superficial labels. Thus Murphy is more distinct than Molloy, and Watt, for all his fluidity, is more clearly conceivable as an individual than Malone. Names and background are of decreasing importance, as we have seen;<sup>1</sup> the narrators of the less substantial Nouvelles have no names at all, and Malone does not feel called on to produce one until nearly half-way through his narrative -- even here he makes it clear that it is purely a matter of linguistic convenience, and his use of the third person, 'je veux dire tout ce qui touche à Malone (c'est en effet ainsi que je m'appelle à présent)' (MM, 89),<sup>2</sup> links the name to his surface self rather than the inner self which observes but cannot be observed, to the "en-soi" rather than the "pour-soi". Since, for Malone, "le coupable", Macmann, is Everyman,<sup>3</sup> the fact that he is given a different name in the earlier part of the narrative is simply a further indication of the irrelevance of names to inner being: 'Car Sapo -- non, je ne peux plus l'appeler ainsi ... Alors car, voyons, car Macmann, ça ne vaut guère mieux mais il n'y a pas de temps à perdre ...' (MM, 101).

<sup>1</sup> Colin Duckworth points out that it is not until the manuscript of En attendant Godot was well advanced that the tramps are finally named, and Pozzo and Lucky too were at first nameless ('The Making of Godot', pp. 135-136).

<sup>2</sup> This is the first clear indication of a relationship of identity between the successive Beckettian heroes.

<sup>3</sup> As is frequently pointed out, the name itself means son of man; in addition, "Mac" is a common Dublin form of address, replacing "Mister", so there is the second sense of Mr. Man.



Louis' description of his pigs might well be a Swiftean summing-up of people: 'tellement différent, et cependant au fond le même. Car tous les cochons sont pareils, quand on les connaît bien' (MM, 48).<sup>1</sup>

This sense that all men are representative has an obvious bearing on the close resemblances between all the Beckettian heroes, who display similar physical and mental traits, produce the same objects from story to story, share memories, favourite pieces of knowledge and sayings, and even idiosyncrasies of speech. Previous heroes have only hinted at a relationship,<sup>2</sup> but Malone is quite specific on the subject -- at heart they are all one and the same: 'A ce moment-là [his death] c'en sera fait des Murphy, Mercier, Molloy, Moran et autres Malone, à moins que ça ne continue dans l'outre-tombe' (MM, 116), and the closing remark leaves the way open for L'innommable. The impersonal view of self, whereby Malone-the-artist observes Malone-the-hero (with no time-gap as in Molloy), encourages the association of the recording consciousness with that of Beckett as implied author, so that the "I" of the narrator becomes multiple: 'Combien de personnes ai-je tuées, en les frappant sur la tête ou en y foutant le feu ... Il y avait le vieux aussi, à Londres je crois, ... je lui ai

<sup>1</sup> The theme of the ultimate sameness of things is thus related to the human condition; cf. Malone's 'les idées se ressemblent tellement, quand on les connaît' (MM, 94), with its repetitive structure emphasising the thematic element.

<sup>2</sup> The hero of 'La fin', for instance, declares: 'Peut-être qu'une autre fois je pourrai ... raconter une autre [histoire]. Ames vives, vous verrez que cela se ressemble' (NTPR, 40), and the Villonesque language universalises the comment.

tranché la gorge avec son rasoir' (MM,116). Malone thus feels he can die with Murphy yet cut the ex-butler's throat with the omniscient narrator of Murphy's narrative. His personality has disintegrated to such an extent that the facet of self responsible for the narrating voice can claim to have created all the preceding Beckettian novels, on one level, where on another he claims to incorporate all their principal actors.

For the anonymous recording "I", Malone-the-hero and Sapo/Macmann are merely different fictional versions of the same being, neither reaching the truth: 'Et cependant j'écris sur moi, avec le même crayon, dans le même cahier, que sur lui. C'est que ce n'est plus moi ... mais un autre dont la vie commence à peine' (MM,61). This narrator 'is not,' as Professor Coe remarks, 'irrevocably committed to being "Malone," as Molloy was to being "Molloy"'.<sup>1</sup> Each fictional self is made up of some elements of the true, inner self, but never comprises the whole: 'Et c'est sans trop de chagrin que je nous retrouve tels que nous sommes, savoir à enlever grain par grain jusqu'à ce que ... la main se mette à jouer, à se remplir et à se vider sur place' (MM,92-3), and the recurrence of the notion of playing clarifies the allusion to the game of creating sub-fictions ('C'est un jeu maintenant, je vais jouer': MM,9), felt here as a hand groping in the mind, forming the scattered elements of personality into different pseudo-selves. This image is developed into a brilliant surrealist picture of the

<sup>1</sup> Coe, p.64 -- Professor Coe's analysis of Malone's diverse personalities (pp.64-65) is extremely helpful.

nightmarish schizophrenia of the self-conscious artist: 'Et il m'arrive même, lorsque tout est tranquille, de la sentir plongée en moi jusqu'au coude, mais tranquille ... Mais bientôt elle tressaille, se réveille, me flatte, crispe, fouille et quelque fois saccage, comme pour se venger de ne pas pouvoir me balayer' (MM,93). Thus, in Malone meurt, the narrator reveals a deeper level of self-awareness and a much more complex sense of his own reality than in the previous novels, where the continuity in the protagonists and their relationship with the overall creator was implied but never directly stated. Here the recording consciousness is openly aware of its plurality, treating its representation of itself, Malone, as the fictional persona of a creative imagination, who in his turn creates sub-fictions, Sapo and Macmann and Lemuel, who are in their turn embodiments of some aspects of Malone's inner being. At the same time, the basic imagination responsible for the narrative merges imperceptibly with the implied author, origin of Beckett's total oeuvre: 'Et si je me raconte, et puis l'autre qui est mon petit, et que je mangerai comme j'ai mangé les autres, c'est comme toujours, par besoin d'amour' (MM,95).<sup>1</sup> If there is an inner self, and the anonymous recording "I" has a reality, it eludes all efforts at formulation: 'Moi non plus je n'ai jamais su me raconter, pas plus que vivre ou raconter les autres. Comment l'aurais-je fait, n'ayant jamais essayé?' (MM,38) -- it will be left to the Unnamable

<sup>1</sup> As Professor Fletcher mentions, the English version omits this eating image (Novels, p.162); this is perhaps because it recurs on the following page, and the repetition considerably reduces the effectiveness of the image.



to attempt to formulate this intangible inner self. It is over against Malone's sense of the plurality of the self that the problem of death, which dominates the novel, must be set -- how to make certain that the death of one ensures the death of all: 'Me montrer maintenant, à la veille de disparaître ... Puis vivre, le temps de sentir, derrière mes yeux fermés, se fermer d'autres yeux. Quelle fin' (MM,38).<sup>1</sup>

Moran was the first Beckettian hero to attempt to grasp the nature of his inner being, glimpsing its fluidity beneath the deceptively stable surface. Malone, the most completely introverted hero so far, is more acutely aware of the mercurial quality of

<sup>1</sup> Professor Coe sees this as an attempt to separate the inner self from the pseudo-personalities 'and so observe the mechanism of death in time, and possibly ... grasp at or penetrate the Néant of the timeless self' (Coe, p.65). However, the whole ethos of Beckett's work pulls against an attempt to evade death. One of the most pervading themes is the longing for silence, oblivion and death as a definitive end to consciousness: 'Naître, voilà mon idée à présent, c'est-à-dire vivre le temps de savoir ce que c'est que le gaz carbonique libre, puis remercier. Ça a toujours été mon rêve au fond' (MM,94). 'Je ne me regarderai pas mourir, ça fausserait tout' (MM,8), declares Malone -- genuine death can only be experienced, not recorded. He shares the existential view of self, considering that its totality only comes into being at the moment of death: 'Je nais dans la mort, si j'ose dire' (MM,208); its corollary, that in order to die he must first live, appears as a marginal problem in Malone meurt, coming to the fore in L'Innommable. Malone's project, to die alive, 'de vivre, et faire vivre, enfin, de jouer enfin et de mourir vif' (MM,63), can thus perhaps be more fairly seen as an attempt to bring the self into time so that it can be annihilated, rather than to pass into timelessness. Ultimately, the artist's essential detachment from desires means that the project is only fitfully pursued -- 'je ne naîtrai ni par conséquent ne mourrai jamais, c'est mieux ainsi' (MM,95).

the self: 'n'ayant été toute ma vie qu'une suite ou plutôt une succession de phénomènes locaux' (MM,112), while adding the dimension of its multiplicity. Thus his concept of self varies from moment to moment: 'Parler par exemple de ces périodes où je me liquéfie et passe à l'état de boue, à quoi cela servirait-il? Ou des autres où je me noierais dans le chas d'une aiguille, tellement je me suis durci et ramassé?' (MM,93); and his whole sense of relationship to his surroundings can change: 'Et si je devais me mettre encore une fois debout ... je remplirais une bonne partie de l'univers, il me semble' (MM,113). Malone accepts that his knowledge of external reality is uncertain, just as Molloy did: 'Je vois le bâton par terre ... C'est-à-dire que j'en vois une partie, comme de tout ce qu'on voit' (MM,153); but Moran's hope of reaching the truth about himself is dashed for his successor who adds a further ramification of scepticism in doubting the very existence of the self: 'peu importe que je sois né ou non, que j'aie vécu ou non, que je sois mort ou seulement mourant, je ferai comme j'ai toujours fait, dans l'ignorance de ce que je fais, de qui je suis, d'où je suis, de si je suis' (MM,95-6). For the latest Beckettian hero the possibilities of knowledge have become even further restricted.

Just as Murphy sought to overcome his need for Celia, and Watt regretted his desire for knowledge, Macmann, Malone's concept of the modern hero, is made to seek out isolation and ignorance; even the asylum offers too much security and must therefore be

seen as leading into falsehood: 'cherchant une issue in the surrounding wall<sup>7</sup> vers la désolation de n'avoir personne ni rien, vers la terre au pain rare, aux abris rares, des terrifiés, vers la noire joie de passer seul et vide, ne rien pouvant, ne rien voulant, à travers le savoir, la beauté, les amours' (MM,197) -- clearly a development, expressed with heightened bitterness and lyricism, of Molloy's linguistically clever 'ne rien pouvoir savoir, savoir ne rien pouvoir savoir, voilà par où passe la paix' (Mo,96),<sup>1</sup> while, on a more general level, highlighting the contrast between the Beckettian hero and the Promethean striver after knowledge of the nineteenth-century novels. This contrast is plain from the beginning of the novel -- Malone utterly refuses to adopt the superior attitude to nature characteristic of the humanistic vision; he will not even feed the birds that come to his window, but identifies with them, as outwith human society, in his description of the manner in which he receives his own food: 'Voici comment ça se passe maintenant. La porte s'entr'ouvre, une main pose un plat sur la petite table qui se trouve là à cet effet, enlève le plat de la veille, et la porte se referme' (MM,17-8).

#### IV. Story

The story of Malone meurt tells how an old man passes the time while dying. If its value depended on the interest excited

<sup>1</sup> Such rhythmic, repetitive phrases are a particular feature of Beckettian rhetoric. While, on the one hand, they suggest the delight of word-play and sentence construction in a foreign tongue, they also echo the tendency towards listing combinations and permutations of different elements of experience, particularly evident in Watt, in an effort to formulate the truth.



by the sequence of events it would be unreadable. Malone enumerates his possessions, loses his pencil, then his stick, and possibly has an inexplicable visitor but more likely imagines it; the event on which the novel is based, Malone's death, if in fact it does occur, takes place outwith the boundaries of the story and thus cannot form an integral part of it. This means that the single moment which gives direction to the book is excluded from it -- a subtle manner of separating form and chaos as Beckett's view of art demands. Action at this level is merely used as a formal device for breaking the flow of reflection, recollection and unmotivated description which represents the dying man's consciousness whenever it is not occupied with storytelling. Indeed, to speak of a "sequence" of events is not strictly accurate, since gaps appear periodically in the narrative, of undefined length (in terms of the fictional timescale) and inaccessible content: 'Quel malheur, le crayon a dû me tomber des mains, car je viens seulement de le récupérer après quarante-huit heures (voir plus haut quelque part) [he has just told us that the passing days are indistinguishable in his room so the precision here is merely comic] d'efforts intermittents. ... Je viens de passer deux journées inoubliables dont nous ne saurons jamais rien' (MM, 88) -- a delightful mockery of the platitudinous "inoubliable". These interruptions may be due to sleep, fatigue, darkness, boredom or loss of consciousness -- as Professor Coe suggests is symbolised by the loss of pencil or

stick<sup>1</sup> -- or they may be simple, unmotivated pauses; one way or the other they successfully prevent any sense of narrative continuity from being formed.

The storyline of the sub-fictions is even more episodic, and is swiftly broken off if it shows the slightest signs of becoming too convincing -- as when the incest-minded Louis approaches his daughter: 'Mais la voyant toujours aussi triste, au point que ses joues étaient humides de larmes, il alla vers elle', and Malone cuts in, abruptly bringing us down to earth: 'Quel ennui. Si je passais à la pierre? [his next project for a story]' (MM,77). Action on the patently fictional level is used to keep the stories moving, it is true, but since these stories are stated pretexts to escape self-conscious existence ('Je me demande si ce n'est pas encore de moi qu'il s'agit, malgré mes précautions': MM,25), the events on which they are built cannot develop significance, being the means only and not the cause of narration. The sub-fictions are never related for their own sakes, as the recurring interjections indicating boredom make clear; and, for Malone, it is not the content of his own story that matters either, but the act of writing it down. It is in writing that he lives: 'C'est afin de savoir où j'en suis, où il en est. Au début je n'écrivais pas, je disais seulement. Puis j'oubliais ce que j'avais dit. Un minimum de mémoire

<sup>1</sup> Coe, p.66.

est indispensable, pour vivre vraiment' (MM,61). It is the act of being conscious that interests him and not the untrustworthy object of consciousness. Also, of course, in his writing he satisfies his innate longing for order; and although his plans often miscarry the pleasure of planning is still his. As the book draws to a close, Malone is quite prepared to dismiss its whole content as a simple scheme to put off the dreaded moment of coming face to face with death:

Tout est prétexte, Sapo et les oiseaux, Moll, les paysans, ceux qui dans les villes se cherchent et se fuient, mes doutes qui ne m'intéressent pas, ma situation, mes possessions, prétexte pour ne pas en venir au fait, à l'abandon, en levant le pouce, en disant pouce et en s'en allant ...  
Oui, on a beau dire, il est difficile de tout quitter (MM,195).<sup>1</sup>

#### V. The Question of Plot

Malone meurt is a plotless novel; the rare events occur completely haphazardly and appear in no way motivated or inter-related, while the novel's outcome, Malone's death, can hardly be seen as the inevitable result of action portrayed. Nor are the sub-fictions plotted: they begin in the middle of nowhere, change course and emphasis for no apparent reason, to trail off inconclusively as Malone loses interest or consciousness. If Moll is depicted as dying because of an illness, it is quite clear that this is a concession to the rules of fiction, since ultimately she is shown to die simply because her creator wants

<sup>1</sup> This love/hate relationship to life is in keeping with other aspects of this paradoxical art; if Beckett's heroes are depicted as being anti-life, this is partly at least because they are aware of all that it could be if it were not for its outcome in death.



her to: 'Moll. Je vais la tuer' (MM,171). Malone is at pains to show that human understanding of causality, as he recreates it in his fictional world, is distinctly questionable: 'C'était une pluie lourde ... ce qui faisait supposer à Macmann qu'elle serait brève, comme s'il y avait un rapport entre la violence et la durée' (MM,122). His mockery is emphasised in the repetitive structure of the second gibe: 'Et au beau milieu de sa souffrance ... il se mit à souhaiter que la pluie ne cesse jamais ni par voie de conséquence sa souffrance ou douleur ... comme s'il existait un rapport entre ce qui souffre et ce qui fait souffrir' (MM,128). The human desire for perceived relationships between events is derided with caustic irony: 'Car cela ne suffit pas aux gens de souffrir, mais il leur faut la chaleur et le froid, la pluie et son contraire qui est le beau temps, et avec cela l'amour, l'amitié ... afin qu'ils puissent savoir très précisément ce que c'est qui ose empêcher leur bonheur d'être sans mélange' (MM,129).

As Molloy has already discovered, logic and reality are two separate things: 'Macmann déchira cette photo finalement et jeta les morceaux en l'air.... Ils se dispersèrent alors, quoique soumis tous aux mêmes conditions, on aurait dit avec empressement' (MM,201). That Malone should be seen attempting to distort his own world into intelligibility then, can only be seen as subtle self-mockery: 'Ce sont mes possessions qui m'ont fait défaillir, si j'en reprends l'énumération je défendrai à nouveau, car les

mêmes causes donnent lieu aux mêmes effets'(MM,148), particularly in view of the doubtful validity of the relationship posited by his initial premise. Malone, like Molloy and Moran before him, is the fictional embodiment of a vision which 'can't see any trace of any system anywhere';<sup>1</sup> indeed he sets himself in agreement with his creator on the question of system or 'l'ordre des choses', referring to his 'impuissance à saisir de quel ordre il s'agit', and adding, echoing Beckett's words, 'Car je n'en ai jamais vu aucun, ni en moi ni en dehors de moi' (MM,65). Obviously, then, his participation in a plotted narrative would be absurd. Where Molloy and Moran felt the need to give some semblance of motivation to their actions, however, Malone's increased awareness, producing as it must a less ambitious narrative, sees no such need, so that notions of logic, causality and motivation can be treated with open derision; at the same time his own and his fictional offspring's lack of them appear as further indications of Beckettian man's increasing sense of alienation from social reality.

## VI. Narrative Movement

Where movement in the preceding novels was basically circular, Malone meurt is essentially linear, moving forward through alternating sections of fictional creation and self-examination,

<sup>1</sup> Israel Shenker, 'Moody Man of Letters', p.3.

recording the approach to death.<sup>1</sup> The logic of this change is perfect, in that for Beckettian man death is the only unique and irreversible event he can experience -- apart from birth -- and, as such, cannot be set on a circular path which allows the possibility of repetition. Unlike Molloy, where the only future before the novel was one of re-reading or re-experiencing the same narrative, Malone meurt envisages a future from which the narrator will be absent: 'je suis capable d'aller jusqu'à la Transfiguration ... Mais je ne crois pas, je ne crois pas me tromper en disant que ces réjouissances auront lieu sans moi, cette année' (MM,7-8). Insofar as the book represents the subjective world of a human being facing death, therefore, its ending is definitive. The circular movement of life still underlies Malone's fictions; Louis' cyclical time revolves around the annual Christmas pig-killing ceremony: 'Louis continuait à entretenir les siens, le soir, à la chandelle, de celui qu'il venait de tuer, jusqu'au jour où on l'appelait pour en tuer un autre' (MM,48) -- and the grotesque echo of Ronsard is typical of Beckett's comic use of incongruous language; Macmann's rolling motion takes up the circular motif in spatial terms: 'il comprit qu'il avançait avec régularité et même une certaine rapidité, selon l'arc d'un cercle gigantesque probablement', explained with delightful logic, 'car il se supposait une extrémité plus lourde

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note the parallels between the contrasting structures of Molloy and Malone meurt and those of the plays which come later: En attendant Godot, about life, has a two-part, circular structure, and Fin de partie, about the approach of death, is linear.



que l'autre, sans savoir laquelle' (MM,135-6). Once attention is directed towards the protagonist's impending death, however, narrative movement reverts to the linear and recurrence becomes impossible: 'je veux y mettre [dans son cahier] une dernière fois ceux que j'ai appelés à mon secours ... afin qu'ils meurent avec moi' (MM,191), 'C'est fini sur moi. Je ne dirai plus je' (MM,208). It is only the introduction of the notion that death constitutes the birth of the self that hints at the book's dealing with the moment when life comes full circle, through lengthening the perspective by evoking the full life span: 'Le plafond s'approche, s'éloigne, en cadence, comme lorsque j'étais fœtus ... Je nais dans la mort, si j'ose dire ... Drôle de gestation. Les pieds sont sortis déjà, du grand con de l'existence' (MM,207-8).<sup>1</sup> The repetitive nature of storytelling is not so forcefully called to mind in Malone meurt as in Molloy, but it is suggested in Malone's reference to his own tales: 'ces histoires à crever debout de vie et de mort ... il n'a jamais été question d'autre chose, à mon souvenir' (MM,93), a remark calculated to set Malone's life and death story in the chain of narratives of the implied author.

## VII. Narrative Control

Narrative control was already shown up as an irrelevancy in Molloy, where both protagonists used the creative process as an

<sup>1</sup> The coroner's joke about Murphy's birthmark becomes more meaningful in retrospect: 'birthmark deathmark ... rounding off the life somehow ... full circle' (M,182), and Pozzo's famous 'Elles accouchent à cheval sur une tombe, le jour brille un instant, puis c'est la nuit à nouveau' (G,154) will add further overtones -- death renders all life meaninglessly the same.

attempt to discover the nature of existence and the self. The failure of fiction to reveal any objective truth about reality is completely accepted by Malone, despite his claim that he writes 'afin de savoir où j'en suis, où il en est' (MM,61), so that he abandons all hope of exploiting his material, and commences the battle with language in full expectation of defeat: 'Après l'échec, la consolation, le repos, je recommençais, à vouloir vivre, faire vivre, être autrui, en moi, en autrui ... Je recommençais. Mais peu à peu dans une autre intention. Non plus celle de réussir, mais celle d'échouer' (MM,37) -- here, of course, he is identified with the implied author who is responsible for the previous ventures into fiction which he is reviewing. Since the creative process is dramatised in Malone meurt, it is the discrepancies between intent and results in narration that indicate lack of control. Malone's attempts at organisation are rudimentary, and even the simple plans he does draw up tend to alter; 'Je pense que je pourrai me raconter quatre histoires ... Une sur un homme, une autre sur une femme, une troisième sur une chose quelconque et une enfin sur un animal ... Mais si je devais finir trop tôt? Pas d'importance ... Car alors je parlerai des choses qui restent en ma possession' (MM,10-11), soon becomes 'je commencerai ... par l'homme et la femme.... Il n'y aura donc que trois histoires' (MM,12), and then alters to admit periodic self-examination: 'A chaque menace de ruine je m'arrêterai pour m'inspecter tel quel ... Après ce bain

de boue<sup>1</sup> je saurais mieux admettre un monde où je ne fasse pas tache' (MM,26). The results, as it happens, are different again, as neither the animal nor the thing gets its story, although both are amply included in the man/woman story; and the inventory with which he plans to end makes its appearance well before then, spoiling his carefully planned symmetry: 'J'ai décidé également de me rappeler brièvement ma situation présente, avant de commencer mes histoires.... ça fera pendant à l'inventaire. L'esthétique est donc pour moi' (MM,13).

Malone's analytical facility renders him quick to point out the essential difference in the degree of narrative control in his present fiction and the preceding novel: 'Autrefois je ne savais pas où j'allais, mais je savais que j'arriverais, je savais que s'accomplirait la longue étape aveugle.... Maintenant c'est l'inverse qu'il faut dire. Car cette route bien marquée, je sens que je ne la ferai peut-être pas jusqu'au bout' (MM,13) -- once again he speaks as the embodiment of all Beckett's heroes to date. Molloy and Moran at least had a controlling point at which their narratives had to arrive, as laid down in the point of departure of each monologue, while Malone's is liable to be interrupted by death at any point, and indeed, at no matter what point death overcomes him it is bound to come as an interruption rather than an organised termination. Nonetheless his organisational ability is not a total failure; his general plans, if

<sup>1</sup> An image which must have some significance in the setting of the later novel, Comment c'est.



not completely abided by, serve as a guideline to maintain the narrative flow, and his last readjustments are quite near the mark: 'Voici en tout cas le programme, la fin du programme.... Visite, diverses remarques, suite Macmann, rappels de l'agonie, suite Macmann, puis mélange Macmann et agonie aussi longtemps que possible' (MM,180). The contrast between the relative order maintained by the narrator in his fictional world and the uncontrollable chaos of the external world as perceived by earlier Beckettian narrators, subtly highlights man's inborn longing for the security of systemisation, as well as suggesting the conflict between the flux of life and the artist's need for order.

Once again, in Malone meurt, the emphasis is on the act rather than the content of narration, so that lack of control over the story content simply helps to underline its insignificance, as well as to suggest the absurdity of omniscience and omnipotence in fiction born of the modern consciousness. Where Molloy and Moran were recounting in the past tense, and could therefore be expected to be able to refer forward in their narratives, Malone relates in the present tense, offering his story as it comes into being; we do not, therefore, expect him to dominate its future, and he is thus deprived of this method of debunking it -- a deprivation perhaps compensated for by the increased identification of Malone with the overall author, which encourages the reader to maintain awareness of the fictional nature of the text before him. If the hero is able to refer

back in his narrative, he makes it clear that it is only by virtue of having it written in his notebook: 'Au début je n'écrivais pas, je disais seulement. Puis j'oubliais ce que j'avais dit.... Sa famille [Sapo's], par exemple, vraiment je ne sais plus ... rien sur elle. Mais je suis tranquille, c'est noté quelque part' (MM,61). Like the heroes of Molloy, Malone indicates that he cannot develop and complete his sub-fictions at will: 'Je n'ai pas pu savoir pourquoi [Sapo] ne fut pas renvoyé. Je vais être obligé de laisser cette question en suspens' (MM,28). Not only does he change his mind, from moment to moment, in his storytelling -- 'L'après-midi il s'en allait ... sous prétexte qu'il travaillait mieux en plein air, non, sans explication' (MM,35), 'Il partait par le petit chemin qu'il avait pris pour venir ... Et ainsi il s'éloignait souvent inaperçu', 'Mais à bien y réfléchir, le départ de Sapo ne devait leur [aux Louis] échapper que rarement' (MM,55 & 56) -- but he is even inconsistent about his present state -- 'Quand mon vase de nuit est plein je le mets sur la table.... Alors je reste vingt-quatre heures sans vase. Non, j'ai deux vases' (MM,18), 'Il y a une sorte de nuit et de jour chez moi ... il fait même tout à fait noir très souvent', 'ici il ne fait jamais nuit, quoi que j'aie pu dire' (MM,84 & 118). These corrections serve to undermine the validity of the different levels of reality which structure the narrative, emphasising that the whole is pure fiction with its creative process laid bare.

### VIII. Selection of Narrative Material

Since Malone holds that all stories are about life and death, equally lacking in intrinsic interest ('ces histoires à crever debout de vie et de mort': MM,93),<sup>1</sup> and that all men are at heart the same ('Du moment que c'est encore ... un vivant ... c'est le coupable': MM,161-2), the criteria for selecting material to be included in his narrative are aimed at meeting simple formal requirements only: 'Ai-je dit que je ne dis qu'une faible partie des choses qui me passent par la tête? ... Je choisis celles qui semblent présenter un certain rapport entre elles' (MM,150), and his amusing addition -- 'J'espère que ce sont les plus importantes' -- is clearly ironic. Like Molloy, he creates his fictional characters on account of loneliness -- although his motivation is conscious where Molloy's was dramatised: 'Et si je me raconte, et puis l'autre qui est mon petit ... c'est ... par besoin d'amour' (MM,95). He tries to use his creations as a means of escaping the misery of self-awareness: 'Ça avance. Rien ne me ressemble moins que ce gamin raisonnable et patient, s'acharnant tout seul pendant des années à voir un peu clair en lui, fermé à l'attrait de l'ombre. Voilà bien l'air léger et maigre qu'il me fallait, loin du brouillard nourricier qui m'achève' (MM,34); but if they momentarily ease the pain of solitude, they quickly reveal their origins and show themselves to

<sup>1</sup> Even the Unnamable's rigmarole reveals a similar view: 'toute cette salade de vie et de la mort' (I,199).



be basically the products of their creator's self-analysis:

'Oui, j'essaierai de faire, pour tenir dans mes bras, une petite créature, à mon image, quoi que je dise' (MM,96).

The failure of his fictional offspring to live up to expectations is offered as one explanation for the irrational violence ('Moll. Je vais la tuer': MM,171') they meet with both here<sup>1</sup> and in all Beckett's work:

Je n'ai pas su jouer. Je tournais, battais des mains, courais, criais, me voyais perdre, me voyais gagner, exultant, souffrant. Puis soudain je me jetais sur les instruments du jeu ... pour les détruire, ou sur un enfant, pour changer son bonheur en hurlement, ou je fuyais, je courais vite me cacher (MM,36).

Frustration and boredom with the limitations of his sub-fictions switches Malone's attention back to the self: 'Je me demande pourquoi je parle de tout ça. Ah oui, c'est pour me désennuyer' (MM,37), and the horrors of the self -- 'ce bain de boue' (MM,26) -- provide the required impetus to return to his stories. If all fails, memories (it is impossible to tell whether they are Malone's or the implied author's) suffice to distract him from death -- conversations with his mother for example: 'Je vois encore l'endroit, en face de chez Tyler. Maraîcher, il était borgne et portait des côtelettes. C'est ça, bavarde' (MM,179). But, basically, all material is equally valid so long as it serves to keep the narrative flowing, to keep him alive -- 'C'est ma vie, ce cahier'

<sup>1</sup> Malone disposing of his sub-fictions shows Beckett weaving experience into his art. Dissatisfied with Mercier et Camier, he showed himself -- as implied author -- similarly relieved to be rid of his characters, declaring of M. Conaire 'En voilà un autre de liquidé, sauf malheur' (MC,105).

(MM,191) -- and postpone the moment of reckoning when the approach of death must be faced.

### IX. The Time Factor

Just as Molloy seemed more real than Moran because of greater immediacy, so the predominance of the time-scale of the creative consciousness in Malone meurt, which plays an even more active part than in Molloy, forces the reader to recognise its hero's essential humanity despite revelation of the fictional quality of his nature once formulated in words.<sup>1</sup> Where each of his predecessors immediately related the present in some measure to the past, Malone's "here and now" is dramatised and looks directly towards the future from his opening words: 'Je serai quand même bientôt tout à fait mort enfin' (MM,7). The past is no longer of interest to him: 'Tout ça c'est du passé. C'est le présent qu'il me faut établir, avant d'être vengé' (MM,16); but his ambiguous identity permits him to indicate the direction of Molloy's narrative -- from a shared point of departure, in bed, moribund -- as being concerned with that past: 'Ces événements [leading up to the present], je me suis quelquefois amusé à les inventer' (MM,15). The narrative of this second novel of the Trilogy contains a variety of verbal tenses, used in so many different ways that only the preponderance of the present tense saves it from complete temporal chaos. Even the present tense

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the Unnamable's loss of self in words: 'je suis en mots, je suis fait de mots, des mots des autres' (I,204).

refers to several different levels of existence, being used to express Malone's physical life: 'Je vois des toits et du ciel' (MM,16), his creative process: 'L'homme s'appelle Saposcat ... Petit nom? Je ne sais pas' (MM,21), 'Je me glisse dans Macmann, dans l'espoir ... d'apprendre quelque chose' (MM,96), and occasionally to imply the direct presence in the little world of the mind of his sub-fictions -- 'J'arrête tout et j'attends. Sapo s'immobilise sur une jambe' (MM,36) -- his memories -- 'Ma jeunesse est plus variée, telle que je la retrouve par moments' (MM,15) -- or his day-dreams -- as when he imagines himself being carried dead from his room: 'De sorte que ma tête cogne contre le chambranle' (MM,115). In spite of this fragmentation, the constant emphasising of the present moment through use of the present tense does contribute to narrative cohesion, and its reference, although on different levels of reality, back to a single creative consciousness gives an impression of unity which the two parts of Molloy failed to achieve.

The future is used to evoke a universal chronology: 'ces réjouissances auront lieu sans moi, cette année' (MM,8), Malone's subjective time-scale: 'Mon histoire arrêtée je vivrai encore' (MM,208), and a purely fictional time-scale for the creatures of his stories: 'l'âge qu'il Macmann vient d'atteindre ... n'est qu'une plaisanterie à côté de l'âge qu'il atteindra' (MM,130). The past is even more complex. In the main the past definite is used for Malone's sub-fictions, true to its purely literary usage,



and the past indefinite for his own immediate past, giving it greater authenticity: cf. 'Macmann reprit ses sens ... dans un asile' (MM,154), and 'J'ai fini ma soupe et renvoyé la petite table à sa place' (MM,30). The distinction is not always so clearcut, however. Slightly deeper penetration into the past of his room takes on the more fictional verbal form: 'une fois qu'il faisait tout à fait noir chez moi j'attendais l'aube ... Et peu à peu ... la clarté revint' (MM,84). Similarly the story of Jackson, although offered as a memory and not a conscious fiction, takes the same form, suggesting the active participation of the imagination: 'un jour je pris conseil d'un israélite' (MM,79-80). On the other hand, a childhood memory reverts to the past indefinite: 'J'ai été témoin d'un des premiers loopings, je le jure' (MM,179), implying the authenticity of the recollection as being shared with the implied author, while the details of conversations with his mother at the time are more likely fictional: 'Elle disait, c'est prodigieux, prodigieux. Alors je changeai d'avis' (MM,179). Malone's past when he is considered as a literary product, as one of the chain of Beckettian pseudo-selves, is given greater validity through being connected to the present by use of the past indefinite: 'Mais peut-être m'a-t-on assommé, dans une forêt peut-être' (MM,15), pointing directly to Molloy. His ambiguous identity, which permits association both with preceding heroes and with their creator, allows reference to the past literary activity of the implied author, with whom he thus identifies

himself, on the same level of reality as the apparently genuine childhood memory or his literary past in previous Beckettian fictions: 'le vieux aussi, à Londres je crois ... je lui ai tranché la gorge' (MM,116). The distinguishing function of the two tenses is clearly called into play to indicate the slip from the subject as Macmann to the subject as Malone/Beckett and back to Macmann again, in a single passage:

C'est un être vivant encore et ... de sexe masculin, vivant de cette vie finissante qui est comme une convalescence, si mes souvenirs sont miens, et qu'on déguste en trottinant après le soleil ... Oui les journées furent courtes alors ... dans la recherche de la chaleur et des petites choses ... à manger.... ces brèves années, où les boulangers étaient souvent indulgents ... et les pommes, j'ai toujours aimé les pommes, pour ainsi dire gratuites lorsqu'on savait s'y prendre ... Mais il s'agit bien de moi! Et le voilà bien tranquille sur son banc (MM,96-7).

The wide range of verbal tenses and related subjects employed is further indication of the complex sense of reality that the novel sets out to convey.

Malone does give a vague indication of the social chronology in which his narrative unfolds; it opens with a reference to the month to come: 'ce serait alors le mois d'avril ou de mai' (MM,7), and he later announces: 'je me crois parvenu à ce qu'on appelle le mois de mai' (MM,111), at which time he expects to die 'd'ici deux ou trois jours' (MM,111). On the other hand, he makes it clear that in his opinion the dates of a man's life can only give 'une faible idée du temps qu'il avait mis pour se faire excuser' (MM,185). Temporal identification, as far as Malone is concerned, is merely a question of submission to the conventions

of narration: 'Je parle de matin et d'après-midi et de telle et telle heure, il faut se mettre à la place des gens si l'on veut absolument en parler' (MM,182). In fact, subjective experience of time makes a nonsense of society's temporal divisions: 'qu'est-ce que c'est, deux ou trois jours, en fin de compte, de plus ou de moins, une plaisanterie' (MM,111), 'Des journées entières m'ont semblé tenir entre deux cillements' (MM,20). In his room the natural cycle of night and day is no longer dependable, and reference to a specific moment can only be ironically viewed: 'A un moment donné, encore un' (MM,185), as must be the early remark: 'Je me demande si je suis en train de perdre du temps en ce moment ou d'en gagner' (MM,13).

Professor Coe points out that Malone is the first to observe 'that the nearer he gets to what must be "the end", the slower time -- his time -- proceeds'.<sup>1</sup> Such a view is supported by such passages as: 'qui a assez attendu attendra toujours, et passé un certain délai il ne peut plus rien arriver ...ni y avoir autre chose que l'attente se sachant vaine' (MM,126),<sup>2</sup> or Malone's conjecture about Macmann: 'il en est peut-être là de son instant où vivre est errer seul vivant au fond d'un instant sans bornes' (MM,109). For Malone, however, these are philosophical considerations of time rather than an expression of felt time, which

<sup>1</sup> Coe, p.66.

<sup>2</sup> The relevance to En attendant Godot, which followed on Malone meurt, is unmistakable -- and, to make a small note on the understanding of the play, it implies that not only the audience but the two tramps too must know that Godot will never come, "l'attente se sachant vaine".



can as easily telescope: 'un instant seulement, je veux dire pendant une demi-heure tout au plus' (MM,185). Nonetheless, the large proportion of the narrative devoted to atemporal experience does give the impression of slowing down the passage of time, an effect which is reinforced by Malone's terms for the period before death: 'cette sorte d'épilogue où l'on ne voit pas très bien de quoi il s'agit' (MM,107), or 'les lenteurs de l'évaporation' (MM,108).

Felt time, for Malone, is in fact discontinuous. The loss of his pencil or stick, or the onset of darkness, or sleep, or unconsciousness, can effect a break in the temporal flow, indicated by a blank space in the text, every bit as disconcerting as the gap in time which Malone depicts Louis as experiencing: 'Louis vit soudain sa fille à une autre place et occupée à autre chose qu'à porter la cuiller de la casserole à sa bouche ... Et cependant il aurait juré qu'il ne l'avait pas quittée des yeux' (MM,76-7). The ordered flow of clock time is completely unrelated to Malone's existence, so much of which is experienced in the timeless, mental world only. The narrative closes with Malone's "here and now" absolutely identified with that of his sub-fictions, as he observes them in his imaginatively projected inner world: 'Cet enchevêtrement de corps grisâtres, c'est eux' (MM,216); and the present and future tenses on which the final utterances are built refer to this fictional realm only: 'Lemuel c'est le responsable, il lève sa hache, ... il ne frappera personne, ... il ne touchera jamais plus personne ...' (MM,216).

But, while the realm in which Malone's sub-fictions are set is avowedly fictional, his own physical setting, as we have seen, makes no claims to objective reality; not only is it touched with the mark of fiction in that all formulation automatically requires an imaginative organisation of brute facts, but the extent to which Malone identifies with the implied author, setting his objectivised self in the line of Beckettian heroes, shows this heroic self to be fictional in the same sense as Macmann or Lemuel, i.e. he is a participant in a written narrative, and has his reality within a world of words. Thus there is no essential difference between the two realms; Lemuel's boat and Malone's bed are both products of the imagination, only one is openly so, being Malone's creation, while the other is only deducibly so. But Malone's self-awareness means that he finds the maintenance of formal distinctions between the outer and inner worlds increasingly difficult. The result is a completely confused sense of time in which verbal expression has nothing to do with actual existence. His imagined death and removal from his room, presented as immediate experience, can thus be interpreted as 'arrivé déjà, on attend seulement le moment de s'en servir' (MM,115), and the English version adds 'hence the delay' (T,236) which hints at the feeling that time has drawn almost to a standstill. This leads directly to word play similar to that already encountered in the earlier novels: 'mon décès, d'ici deux ou trois jours si j'ai bonne mémoire' (MM,116) -- a play which depends for its logic on the

dominance of the time-scale of the creative consciousness; and confusion is deliberately sought in: 'Mais il viendrait ... un jour ... qui le verrait ... courir ... sur la plaine.... Maintenant ce n'était pas la première fois que Macmann se roulait par terre, mais il l'avait toujours fait sans arrière-pensée locomotive. Tandis qu'alors ... il comprit qu'il avançait avec régularité' (MM,135). The only possible conclusion is that Malone is expressly drawing attention to the lack of temporal distinction between his own and Macmann's world in order to hint at his own fictional nature. Basically, the only valid temporal order in Malone meurt is the order in which the narrative is written -- an order which is not reflected in the verbal tenses. And the resultant discrepancies once again emphasise the chasm between language and reality, while at the same time pointing up the contrast between the organisation of Malone's narrative and the chaos of the existence from which its substance is drawn.

#### X. The Thematic Factor

The rhythm established by interweaving and contrasting themes in Malone meurt complements and highlights the novel's architecture, seen as alternating passages of storytelling and self-examination, emanating from a single consciousness and thus combined in a unified organisation. The rhythm is based on antithetical motifs, and is similar to but even more strongly marked than that in Molloy. Once again the basic opposition



is between movement and stasis reflecting the contrast between the mental and physical worlds. The emphasis on opposing motifs of truth and illusion, flux and stability, to the fore in both Watt and Molloy, fades away here, since Malone has renounced the struggle to reveal the truth underlying illusory appearances, he knows that such a feat is beyond him; and he is no longer obsessed with the need to believe in the stability of the world, since he has turned his back on society with all its claims to dominate nature. The notions of flux and illusion now play their part in developing the all-embracing theme of uncertainty -- the dominant aspect of Beckettian vision; while motifs of loneliness and suffering occur with increasing frequency and now form an important element in the mode of being which the themes collaborate to reveal. As Ruby Cohn indicates, Malone, like the Unnamable after him, equates his quest directly with the act of writing -- the actual setting down of words on paper becomes a seeking out of a means of living, of bringing the self into existence, and of dying.<sup>1</sup> In general, the thematic material not only helps to establish the novel's rhythm and coherence but also serves to relate it to the rest of Beckett's work, thus indicating that it reflects a particular stage in the developing awareness of the overall author and not just the vision of a single fictional creation.

<sup>1</sup> Ruby Cohn, 'Still Novel', p.49; Mrs. Cohn sees Malone as being 'in quest of a peaceful end through his fiction' only; but, as has already been ascertained, for Malone the desire to die in peace entails the need to be certain of living, and thus his artistic activity also serves to bring him to life.

The general plan of the novel is based on the simple opposition of stasis, leading to death, in the physical world, and movement, equated with life, given free rein in the little world of the mind. The text is studded with variants of the phrase "aller et venir", already noticeable in Molloy, frequently coupled with the notion that movement is necessary for life: 'c'est deux corps distincts ... qui n'ont pas besoin l'un de l'autre pour aller et venir et se maintenir en vie' (MM,120), 'Parce qu'afin de ne pas mourir il faut aller et venir' (MM,107), 'Macmann/ pourrait aller et venir et de cette façon survivre' (MM,136). This stands in sharp contrast to the severely restricted movement of the paralysed speaker and supports his conviction that he is dying. Malone presents his whole past life in terms of motion and immobility: 'toute ma vie j'ai marché, sauf les premiers mois et depuis que je suis ici' (MM,15), and even combines the two: 'moi qui toute ma vie suis allé à tâtons, et dont l'immobilité aussi était une sorte de tâtonnement, oui, j'ai beaucoup stationné à tâtons' (MM,92). The movement which breaks in upon his present immobility is mental, conceived of as the passage from the world of the self to that of his pseudo-selves: 'Je ne rentrerai plus dans cette carcasse qu'afin d'en savoir l'heure' (MM,34), 'j'essaierai de me sortir du lit... Sinon je ne sais pas ce que je ferai. Aller voir ce que devient Macmann peut-être' (MM,154), or the detachment of the subjective "I" who experiences from the anonymous objective "I" who relates,

to escape from the painful immediacy of life: 'Je vais quand même continuer un peu, en pensant à autre chose, je ne peux pas rester ici. Je m'entendrai de loin, l'esprit loin, parler des Louis, parler de moi, l'esprit errant, loin d'ici' (MM,77). In the end, although neither he nor his bed has stirred from their place in the physical world, he feels himself to be spinning in space: 'je ferai peut-être mieux d'en finir avec moi d'abord ... La vitesse à laquelle ça tourne est gênante certes, mais elle ne fera probablement qu'augmenter' (MM,190), they join in the cyclical motion of the visible universe -- movement without fundamental change.

Malone's sub-fictions, on the other hand, although condemned to movement, display a distinct propensity for stasis. Sapo is set in contrast to surrounding activity: 'il aimait le vol de l'épervier ... Immobile il suivait des yeux les longs vols planés' (MM,30), 'Au milieu des tumultes, à l'école et dans sa famille, il restait immobile à sa place' (MM,31);<sup>1</sup> even his walk is halting: 'Souvent il s'arrêtait, pour repartir, après un temps de station chancelante, dans les directions les plus inattendues' (MM,39). Macmann is stationary when we first meet him (or Sapo gives way to him) -- 'L'ennuyeux, c'est qu'il ne bouge pas. Depuis le matin il est là et c'est maintenant le soir' (MM,102) --

<sup>1</sup> Ludovic Janvier relates Pascal's 'tout le malheur des hommes vient d'une seule chose, qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer en repos dans une chambre' (*Pensées*, 139 B) to Malone's 'L'essentiel ... c'est que malgré mes histoires je continue à tenir dans cette chambre ... et je suis tranquille, j'y tiendrai le temps qu'il faudra' (MM,114), and Malone's language on the subject of Sapo certainly supports such an association (Janvier, p.264).



but the life force necessitates his moving on -- 'Il se lèvera donc, qu'il le veuille ou non' (MM,107). He has a definite preference for stillness: 'il se couchait et s'asseyait au moindre prétexte et ne se levait pour repartir que lorsque le struggle for life ou élan vital lui mettait le feu au cul. Et une bonne partie de son existence a dû se passer dans une immobilité de pierre' (MM,129-30).<sup>1</sup> This in part explains the fact that 'Surpris par la pluie ... Macmann s'arrêta et se coucha' (MM,121), but movement, as usual, must follow: 'Macmann se mit enfin à s'agiter ... finalement en tournant sur lui-même toujours dans le même sens' (MM,135). The next time we meet him he is stationary again, in bed in an asylum. His successor, Lemuel,<sup>2</sup> combines the two tendencies also: 'Quand les affres de la réflexion ne le clouait pas sur place, pendant de longues minutes, il allait et venait sans cesse' (MM,177).

The dramatic presentation of the act of literary creation, in Malone meurt, and the recurring reminders of the presence of the implied author, encourages the appreciation of another level of significance in the movement/stasis theme. If Malone can wish on his pseudo-self, Macmann, 'une paralysie généralisée épargnant à la rigueur les bras' (MM,134), with all necessities supplied to put off death as long as possible -- echoing Moran's

<sup>1</sup> Revealing fiction as a form of wish fulfilment -- cf. Arsène's 'longing to be turned into a stone pillar' (W,48).

<sup>2</sup> Edith Kern points out that Lemuel is the Hebrew for Sam, so that his murders represent the author disposing of his characters (Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett: 1970) p.221 -- a further reminder of the not-so-hidden activity of the implied author in this novel.

ambition: 'Etre vraiment enfin dans l'impossibilité de bouger' (Mo, 217) -- it is not only to escape from the pain of experiential life, but also to permit the freedom of activity in the world of his mind. If physical movement is equated with the suffering of physical life, stasis permits mental activity, just as it did for Murphy -- 'As he lapsed in body he felt himself coming alive in mind, set free to move among its treasures' (M, 78). And the artistic act is the fullest exploitation of the freedom of the inner world. On this level of awareness, the basic situation imposed by the implied author on his hero takes on a new significance. Malone is, like all Beckett's heroes -- as Eugene Webb maintains<sup>1</sup> -- a portrait of the artist. And to reveal artistic activity at its optimum level, attachment to the visible world must be reduced to a minimum. Thus, the depiction of Malone at a stage of almost total physical paralysis permits the hidden author to depict the artistic side of his hero's nature at its most active: 'l'essentiel, nous y revoilà, c'est que malgré mes histoires je continue à tenir dans cette chambre' (MM, 114); only the overall creator sees that it is in order to create his fictions that he must stay still in his room.

Since the novel is built of passages alternating between Malone's motionless world and the mobile world of his fictional creations, a steady rhythm is established, based on fluctuation

<sup>1</sup> Webb, p. 87.

between antithetical motifs. Just as in Molloy, the rhythm of this novel reflects that of its narrator's existence: 'L'essentiel est de s'alimenter et d'éliminer, si l'on veut tenir. Vase, gamelle, voilà les pôles' (MM,18), 'Parler .. de ces périodes où je me liquéfie et passe à l'état de boue ... Ou des autres où je me noieraïs dans le chas d'une aiguille, tellement je me suis durci et ramassé' (MM,93). Even his immediate environment appears to him as similarly cadenced: 'elle a ses alternances aussi, ma lumière à moi ... ses crépuscules et aubes' (MM,86) -- although not coinciding with the flow of nature; his whole room pulsates:

Une sorte d'air y circule ... et quand tout se tait je l'entends qui se jette contre les cloisons qui le rejettent naturellement. Et alors quelque part au centre il se noue et se dénoue d'autres vagues, d'autres assauts, d'où sans doute ce faible bruit de grève aérienne qu'est mon silence (MM,87).

As death approaches 'Le plafond s'approche, s'éloigne, en cadence, comme lorsque j'étais fœtus' (MM,207) -- a highly significant comparison which may well provide the key to the choice of this antithetical rhythm, beating out the pulse of life throughout the book.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Peggy Guggenheim, Confessions of an Art Addict (1960), says of Beckett, in a different context, that 'Ever since his birth he had retained a terrible memory of life in his mother's womb' (p.50), so that it is possible to see the thematic rhythm in his novels as an authentic expression of his own sensations of living.

Desmond Morris, The Naked Ape (1967), in a discussion of the calming effect of the sound of the heart-beat on the newborn child (on account of its familiarity as a pre-natal experience), points out that 'wherever you find insecurity, you are liable to find the comforting heart-beat rhythm in one kind of disguise or another' (p.109); and if there is one feeling which all Beckettian characters have in common, it is their intense sense of insecurity in relation to the external world. The ubiquitous rockingchair may in part be explained similarly.

On the subject of the integration of Beckett's pre-natal recollections into his art, the Observer Colour Supplement 14 July 1968, reproduced a photograph by the Swedish photographer, Lennart Nilsson, of a human fœtus alive inside the womb, sucking its thumb (p.29) -- witness Molloy's fondness for his sucking-stones, or Malone's 'j'aime sucer' (MM,89).



The sub-fictions mirror this rhythmical existence, depicting action and inaction, movement and stasis, in turn, with occasional reference to other contrasting motifs to round out the cadence: 'Et le voilà [Sapo] ... errant à travers la terre, passant de l'ombre à la clarté, de la clarté à l'ombre, avec indifférence' (MM,58), '[Edmond] lâcha sa pelle, se détournâ et s'en alla lentement, d'un même mouvement égal et arrondi, passant sans heurt aucun de l'effort au repos, comme à sa seule suite possible' (MM,71).

Scepticism determines the approach to life in Malone meurt, as it did in the earlier novels, extending here to include the narrator's own sense of identity as being of uncertain nature. All is sensed as flux: the self -- 'une suite ou plutôt une succession de phénomènes locaux' (MM,112) -- possessions -- 'j'ai assez péri dans cette chambre pour savoir que des choses en sortent, et que d'autres y rentrent.... Je ne m'explique pas autrement l'aspect changeant de mes possessions' (MM,144) -- and the world round about, even as portrayed in Malone's sub-fictions --

l'espace entourait Macmann de toutes parts ... avec l'infini des corps bougeant à peine et se débattants ... et les instants coulaient comme exsudés des choses dans un grand ruissellement confus fait de suintements et de torrents, et serrées les unes contre les autres les choses empêtrées changeaient et mouraient chacune suivant sa solitude (MM,198-9).

Uncertainty levels all and makes clearcut distinctions meaningless: 'rien ne ressemble davantage à un pas qui monte qu'un pas qui descend où même qui va et vient sans jamais changer de niveau ... pour celui qui ... ignore où il se trouve' (MM,83) -- a remark also relating to the subdued theme of the coincidence of contraries. Doubt is totally accepted by Malone, a condition of life,

and all pondering of a sceptical bent is dismissed as fatuity: 'J'ai ce sentiment [that he will not live long], et je lui fais confiance. Mais en quoi diffère-t-il de ceux qui m'abusent depuis que j'existe? Non, c'est là un genre de question qui ne prend plus' (MM,8). His fictional pseudo-selves thus share his ignorance: '[Sapo] acceptait avec une sorte de joie de ne rien y comprendre' (MM,30), 'ou l'on sait tout ou l'on ne sait rien, et Macmann ne sait rien' (MM,108). Once accepted, doubt becomes irrelevant -- 'mes doutes qui ne m'intéressent pas' (MM,195) -- since life must go on: 'je ferai comme j'ai toujours fait, dans l'ignorance de ce que je fais, de qui je suis, d'où je suis, de si je suis' (MM,95-6).<sup>1</sup> The truth, that all certainty is illusion, must be accepted and then ignored: 'Et je me réjouissais ... à l'idée que je savais maintenant ce que j'avais à faire ... En quoi je me faisais naturellement encore une fois des illusions ... mais quand même pas au point de pouvoir m'en vouloir à présent. Car tout en me disant, Que c'est simple et beau! je me disais, Tout s'obscurcira à nouveau' (MM,92). Where Molloy was at pains to point out the falsity of clear ideas, Malone avails himself of every opportunity to relax in the deceptive security of reason and logic, knowing that 'le grand fauve du sérieux, rageant, rugissant' (MM,36) will unfailingly reclaim him.

<sup>1</sup> The acceptance of pervading uncertainty explains the minor theme of indifference underlying the course of the narrative; towards approaching death Malone declares: 'Je serai neutre et et inerte' (MM,8), and, despite later apparent disturbance, 'au-delà de ce tumulte le calme est grand, et l'indifférence' (MM,43); indifference is also the mark of the Schopenhauerian artist.

For Malone the excursions into the imaginary world of his sub-fictions are conscious play-acting; he is no longer interested in establishing a relationship between the contents of his mind and objective reality, knowing that it cannot be done. The failure of language to reveal that reality is therefore not such a bitter disillusionment to him as it was to his predecessors: 'Plus la peine de faire le procès aux mots. Ils ne sont pas plus creux que ce qu'ils charrient' (MM,37).<sup>1</sup> The only accessible truth is what occurs in the mind and it is utterly disconnected from truth about external reality. The nature of subjective truth is thus paradoxically illusory or fictitious, so that he can say of his imaginary confined exit from his room: 'c'est arrivé déjà ... qu'y-a-t-il de vrai dans ce babil ? Je ne sais pas. Je crois seulement que je ne peux rien dire qui ne soit vrai, je veux dire qui ne me soit déjà arrivé, ce n'est pas la même chose mais ça ne fait rien' (MM,115). Just as uncertainty must be accepted and then set aside, so the failure of language to reveal objective truth must be admitted and then ignored, if speech is to be possible at all: 'Parler de mes vases m'a ravigoté un peu. Ils ne sont pas à moi, mais je dis mes vases, comme je dis mon lit, ma fenêtre, comme je dis moi' (MM,148). His attitude here contrasts sharply with the obstinate bad faith of the confident Mr. Hackett, in Watt, whom the turn of phrase brings to mind.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Malone, then, like Bram Van Velde, is 'the first to submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation, in the absence of terms or ... in the presence of unavailable terms' ('Three Dialogues', p.125) -- for Malone too is an artist.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. 'This seat ... was of course not his, but he thought of it as his. This was Mr. Hackett's attitude towards things that pleased him' (W,5).



Malone is becoming aware, however, of the power of language to take on a substantiality of its own, to have a more convincing reality than what it ostensibly records: 'mes notes ont une fâcheuse tendance, je l'ai compris enfin, à faire disparaître tout ce qui est censé en faire l'objet' (MM,162), and it is the development of this realisation that will give rise to the Unnamable's frenzied efforts to prevent the annihilation of the self under the weight of words. The present hero, however, is satisfied with the occasional deflationary gibe at language: 'J'attribuerais ... une partie de mes, de mes infortunes à ce désordre auditif si malheureusement je n'étais pas disposé à y voir plutôt un bienfait. Infortunes, bienfait, je n'ai pas le temps de choisir mes mots' (MM,60).

The isolation of Beckettian man from all social contact, which has been the trend in the earlier works, is completed in Malone meurt. Even the hand which appears daily, bearing food, at the start of the novel, eventually ceases to arrive. If Malone's visitor is real, no communication takes place between him and the bedridden hero, and his imagined successors inevitably 'passeront la journée à me regarder avec colère et dégoût' (MM,188). Social contact as it is portrayed in Malone's stories is, as already ascertained, mere travesty. The need for companionship is accordingly more intensely felt, and Malone's tales are in part intended to blot out the pain of loneliness: 'd'ici là [the moment of death] j'ai le temps de folâtrer, à

terre, dans cette brave compagnie que j'ai toujours désirée, toujours recherchée, et qui n'a jamais voulu de moi' (MM,34).<sup>1</sup> Like Molloy's evocation of A and B, Malone's fictitious offspring will break his solitude: 'J'essaierai de faire, pour tenir dans mes bras, une petite créature' (MM,96); and it is in this context that the irrational notion of love (which meets with nothing but derision when considered in a sexual context) is allowed to creep in: 'Et si je me raconte, et puis l'autre qui est mon petit ... c'est comme toujours, par besoin d'amour, merde alors, je ne m'attendais pas à ça, d'homuncule, je ne peux m'arrêter' (MM,95), and the loss of control heightens the impression of illogicality attached to the concept.

If isolation and the need for love and companionship are basic conditions of existence, so also is suffering, another irrational element of life.<sup>2</sup> Indeed the two go hand in hand, as can be seen from Malone's imagined relationship with the little girl whom he conjures up as a possible successor to his visitor: 'je pourrai peut-être en attraper un, une petite fille par exemple, et l'étrangler à moitié ... pour qu'elle consente à me donner mon bâton ... à m'embrasser, à me caresser, à me sourire, à me donner mon chapeau, à rester auprès de moi' (MM,188). Beckett himself is deeply concerned with the gratuitous pain and violence

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Molloy's 'De la fumée, des bâtons, de la chair ... autour du désir d'un frère. Ces haillons je sais les susciter, pour en couvrir ma honte' (Mo,20).

<sup>2</sup> From a philosophical point of view Professor Coe sees Beckett's interest as being in the gratuitous character of suffering: 'it springs from the uncaused Void, and consequently belongs to the same order of being as the Self, and may be actual, verifiable evidence of its reality' (Coe, p.62).

of life.<sup>1</sup> As preoccupation with philosophical ponderings on life gives way to felt life in his novels, these themes naturally come to the fore. Where occasional examples of arbitrary violence occurred in the earlier works -- Molloy's and Moran's treatment of the old men they encounter on their journeys for instance -- Malone meurt is studded with them. Louis' delight in his pig-killing<sup>2</sup> hints at the sadism of Malone's imagined relationship with the little girl -- an element in human contact which will loom large in Comment c'est. The tortured descriptions of the dead mule, 'La bouche entr'ouverte, les lèvres, retroussées ... les yeux exorbités' (MM,68-9), of the terror and pain involved in the slaughtering of animals -- rabbits, hens and pigeons (MM,74-5) -- of the brutality of men towards the beasts they exploit, the cabman and his horse -- 'en général furieux et violacé ... De ses énormes mains exaspérées il tire sur les brides ou ... les fait claquer avec colère tout le long de l'échine' (MM,105); all dwell on the element of pain. Lemuel, who is depicted as given to the self-infliction of physical pain, perhaps suggests one reason for Malone's apparent lingering over such items:

Ecorché vif du souvenir, l'esprit grouillant de cobras, n'osant ni rêver ni penser et en même temps impuissant à s'en défendre, ses cris étaient de deux sortes, ceux ayant pour cause unique la douleur morale et ceux ... moyennant lesquels

<sup>1</sup> To Tom F. Driver he spoke of three signs posted on a taxi glass partition: 'one asked for help for the blind, another help for orphans, and the third for relief for the war refugees. One does not have to look for distress. It is screaming at you even in the taxis of London' ('Beckett by the Madeleine' p.24).

<sup>2</sup> Probably suggested by Madden in Mercier et Camier: 'Les seules branches où je puisse me vanter d'avoir, je ne dirais pas excellé, mais du moins réussi, c'est l'abattage des petits agneaux, bouvillons et chevreaux et l'émasculatation des petits taureaux ...' (MC,57).



il espérait prévenir cette dernière. La douleur physique par contre, semblait lui être d'un précieux secours (MM,177).

It is the Unnamable, of course, who will suffer "la douleur morale" most intensely of the Trilogy heroes, as the ability to create viable fictions weakens. Malone draws attention to the violence incorporated in preceding novels: 'Combien de personnes ai-je tuées, en les frappant sur la tête ou en y foutant le feu' (MM,116), and in the present novel not only kills off Moll in a most painful manner but ends his narrative in a veritable blood-bath. Thus suffering and violence appear at all levels of the novel as elements closely associated with death -- the central subject of the work -- as well as inescapably allied to life.

#### XI. Repetition

Linking phrases and images are used, in Malone meurt, to relate it to Beckett's other works, and in particular to its immediate predecessor, Molloy; they also set Malone's sub-fictions in the line of Beckett's other fictions, suggesting that as Sapo and Macmann are to Malone so he and Molloy are to Beckett. The inventory which both Molloy (Mo,7) and Malone speak of, produces here a list of items which refer back to previous Beckettian fictions. If Sapo has Murphy's gull's eyes, Macmann rolls 'à la manière d'un grand cylindre' (MM,136), an image on which Moran also drew: 'roulant sur moi-même, comme un grand cylindre' (Mo,236). Malone gives Macmann the traditional Beckettian hat -- 'une ficelle rattache ce chapeau au premier bouton du manteau' (MM,100) -- and describes his clothes with as much detail as was given about

Murphy's or Watt's attire. Both Malone and Molloy give identical theories for the means by which each arrived in his present room: 'Dans une ambulance peut-être, un véhicule quelconque certainement' (Mo,7 & MM,15); and a paragraph describing Moran's journey home begins 'Quand il pleuvait, quand il neigeait', a phrase drawn on by Malone in an attempt to continue Macmann's story, although this time it proves a false start (Mo,265 & MM,201). Malone's 'Voilà un joli morceau' (MM,31) contrasts aptly with Moran's 'Ça aurait fait un beau morceau', 'ça aurait fait un joli morceau' (Mo,235 & 257) -- Malone is no longer afraid of deluding his readers into belief in the objective reality of his narrative, and openly creates his fictions for fiction's sake; he can thus quite happily include passages that his literary forebears might consider dangerous or unnecessary. Motifs linked by use of contrast are thus used to reveal the change in attitude arrived at in the present novel. The re-introduction of these different narrative elements subtly implies that the present novel is simply a reformulation of its forerunners, of the 'bribes d'un pensum appris et oublié' (Mo,46); and this impression is reinforced by the appearance of turns of phrase in Malone's narrative similar or identical to those already remarked on as repeatedly employed in Molloy: 'C'est ainsi que je raisonne' (MM,59), 'Ce n'est pas le mot' (MM,36), 'Moll n'était pas dans son assiette' (MM,173).

At its simplest level, repetition serves a variety of purposes. Malone shares Molloy's and Moran's habit of repeating themselves when narrative inspiration is failing or seeking new

impetus:

Et souvent on profitait du clair de lune pour ... réviser les machines et les apprêter pour l'aube proche. L'aube proche.

Je me suis endormi. Or je ne tiens pas à dormir (MM,35).

Cherchons un autre joint. L'air pur

Je vais quand même essayer de continuer. L'air pur du plateau. C'était un plateau en effet (MM,195-6).

Variations on the phrase 'c'est humain' occur five times,<sup>1</sup> insisting on the representational quality of the narrator's vision despite its idiosyncratic manner of expression. Foetus and womb imagery runs through the book -- 'je suis un vieux foetus à présent' (MM,94), 'son vieux coeur ... dans sa cage' (MM,47), 'Peut-être ... que je suis dans une sorte de caveau' (MM,82), 'les cavernes où j'étais heureux' (MM,95) -- emphasising the birth-to-death cycle of man's life. Leitmotifs already familiar from the earlier novels set the tone of ignorance and impotence: "je crois", "je ne crois pas", "je ne comprends pas", "je ne peux pas", "sait-on jamais"; and again the principal connectives are "et" and "mais", with even fewer and weaker "car", suggesting a self-destructive and discontinuous world.

## XII. Conclusion

As in Molloy, narrative viewpoint in Malone meurt is limited to the subjective vision of a dramatised narrator. It is, however, complicated by the disintegrating sense of identity of the

<sup>1</sup> See MM,108, 125, 178, 180, & 183.



speaker, so that once again, as in Watt, responsibility for certain passages of the narrative becomes difficult to ascertain. Malone does in fact claim full responsibility, but his sense of self shifts from protagonist to anonymous observer, from a composite of Beckettian heroes to a consciousness indistinguishable from that of the central creator of all the novels, so that the reader can never establish a stable relationship with him. Reiterated implications of the existence of the hidden author in a novel related in the first person -- a narrative technique which claims the authenticity of the experience depicted and forces the reader to share it -- creates in us a highly complex awareness. We are not allowed to forget the artifice on which the book is founded, that Malone, a compulsive writer who continues to put pencil to paper until death overcomes him, is simply the present product of Beckett's urge to write. We are constantly reminded that the hero with whom the narrative technique encourages us to identify ourselves is a fiction and that the creative literary act is dependent on the ability to deceive<sup>1</sup> -- hence the mass of derogatory comments aimed at it. We are thus driven to accept that the faith we entertain in our understanding of consciousness and any belief we might hold that we have achieved a state of self-knowledge, or self-possession, are founded on illusion, are in fact our own fictions.

The reader is never quite permitted to attain the secure

<sup>1</sup> Professor Fletcher points to the trick 'whereby a decrepit man manages to write to the last' (Novels, p.165).

sense of superiority over the novel's world which the ironic mode of its presentation might be expected to induce. One reason for this is that the fiction itself never claims to be more than it is<sup>1</sup> -- an insubstantial linguistic construction -- and its creator introduces powerful reminders of this fact in order to control the reader's natural tendency to suspend disbelief. This means that any deception involved is self-induced. The alert reader cannot fail to appreciate that the irony of such remarks as 'Tout ça doit être à moitié imaginaire' (MM,19), referring to the behaviour of the woman who used to feed Malone, or 'le crayon français, à supposer qu'il existe réellement' (MM,153), is consciously directed by Malone in his capacity as the knowing spokesman of the implied author. If Malone allows himself, in his role as hero, to appear naïve in his tale of Jackson's mockery of his incontinence,<sup>2</sup> 'Jackson m'appelait le mérinos, je ne sais pourquoi, peut-être à cause du dicton. Moi, j'avais dans l'idée que l'idée de troupeau errant lui allait mieux à lui qu'à moi' (MM,81), it is clearly only simulated dramatic irony, since the "dicton" referred to can only be "laisser pisser le mérinos" -- a subtle example of the different levels of self-awareness on which the narrator seems to exist simultaneously. Our insecurity is increased by the impossibility

<sup>1</sup> Professor Fletcher has already remarked on the relation to Tristram Shandy of the diarist device used in both Molloy and Malone meurt; Sterne too achieves this insecurity of relationship between reader and novel. (Novels, p.131).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Molloy's troubles with 'la pissade ambulante' (Mo,36).

of ascertaining who exactly is responsible for intrusive comments like 'j'ai toujours aimé les pommes' (MM,97), or the unexpected, lyrical passage beginning: 'Lasse de ma lassitude, blanche lune dernière, seul regret, même pas' (MM,171), so reminiscent of the lyrical interruptions in Watt, or the comments of the intrusive author in Murphy, which suggests their origin in the mind of the overall creator. The dividing line between fictional author, Malone, and the real author, Beckett -- or the façade of self which he wishes to present in his novel as implied author -- is therefore extremely tenuous. And whenever we pass beyond Malone to the creative consciousness in which he has his origin we participate in the experience of the dilemma of the twentieth century artist, as Beckett sees him, whose truth is the inability to grasp the truth, and whose success as an artist seeking after truth paradoxically lies in his failure to create fictions in whose reality he can bring himself to believe; 'The other type of artist -- the Apollonian -- is absolutely foreign to me',<sup>1</sup> Beckett declared to Israel Shenker.

Beyond the fiction of the bedridden old diarist lies the open admission that the whole literary creation is the product of the creative imagination of an external author. The honesty with which the novel's fictional status is revealed encourages us to believe that, just as Malone's sub-heroes are at heart fragments of his own identity, so the vision of life he expresses is an authentic attempt to formulate some aspect of Beckett's

<sup>1</sup> 'Moody Man of Letters', p. 3.



own vision. Where the implied author and the narrator/hero diverge, however, is on the level of involvement. Malone can only exist so long as the writing continues ('c'est ma vie, ce cahier ... j'ai mis du temps à m'y résigner': MM, 191), and death will come for him when it ends. For Beckett, the creation of a pseudo-self, Malone, permits him to obtain an objective view of the dying process, which for him dominates all of life.<sup>1</sup> In a way, the writing of the novel permits him to set his own life in perspective, without the emotional involvement which he senses threatening the subject -- Malone is constantly evading it through his fictions. If death makes a nonsense of life, he can at least use it as brute matter for a fiction, and thereby transcend it. Fiction becomes a record of the struggle of consciousness with the flux of existence, concrete evidence of the existence of the artist; death may annihilate the artist but not the art.<sup>2</sup>

If Malone's main concern is ostensibly with the formulation of a mode of existence, the contents of a consciousness aware of impending death, the novel he creates nonetheless raises many questions concerning the nature of the narrator's identity. He himself, apparently inadvertently, brings the problem of the

<sup>1</sup> On the level of the implied author, then, Professor Coe's view of Malone's artistic activity as an attempt to 'observe the mechanism of death in time' (Coe, p.65) is supported here; but on this matter the implied author and the narrator separate.

<sup>2</sup> This leads on to Ludovic Janvier's main thesis that Beckett's driving force is directed towards the immortalisation of the self in words: 'L'entêtement à parler, c'était donner sa chance au dépassement de cette parole manquée qui définit ... la condition de l'homme dans le langage. Dans ce dépassement constamment essayé, le seul espoir de laisser une trace' (Janvier, p.260).

actual existence and unity of the self to the fore, despite his efforts to avoid the frightening shadows of introspection. In the next novel, L'innommable, the distinction between the narrator and the implied author is even less clear, so that the creative process is presented with greater immediacy, and the authenticity of the creative experience portrayed carries greater conviction, since it is that of the central consciousness and not related to an individualised fictional hero. The problems of the nature of the self which underly the obsessive need to create these fictional pseudo-selves, dramatised in Malone meurt, are brought out into the open in the last novel of the Trilogy, so that the artist's urge to create comes under closer scrutiny. And the battle with language becomes bitter once more as the implications of the relationship between words and self-definition are realised.

CHAPTER VI

L'INNOMMABLE



## I. Introduction

Between writing the second and third books of his Trilogy, Beckett once again retreated from the abstraction of the novel to the concrete world of the theatre. Colin Duckworth quotes him as saying 'I began to write Godot ... as a relaxation, to get away from the awful prose I was writing at that time'.<sup>1</sup>

En attendant Godot avoids the difficulties of verbalising the mode of being of Beckettian man by setting him before our eyes. For those familiar with the material in the author's novels, the play, while it made him famous, covers little new ground, although its technical innovations are significant from a theatrical point of view. L'innommable, the final novel of the Trilogy, once again faces the problems of solitude, abstraction, disintegration of the sense of identity and, above all, the deception of language. Where Malone's being is portrayed on the level of the images of consciousness and his urge to write is dramatised, the Unnamable reaches an even deeper level of awareness and attempts to probe

<sup>1</sup> 'The Making of Godot', p.123.

beneath the images and structures of the mind to the undefinable inner core -- evoked in the recurring motifs of silence and absence -- and his creative drive produces a prose constantly preoccupied with 'exploring the conditions of its own creation', as Ronald Hayman puts it.<sup>1</sup> Attention still fluctuates between the subject and his stories, but here the stories are even less substantial than in Malone meurt and the introspective subject takes over the larger portion of the narrative. The speaker no longer has any determinate shape and all his self-concretions are dismissed as falsifications of the truth. The tendency towards disintegration and abstraction which the novels progressively reveal is continued in L'innommable, reaching a point described by Beckett as 'No "I", no "have", no "being". No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on'.<sup>2</sup> His novel-writing here reaches an impasse from which it takes over ten years to extricate itself.

To write a novel under such epistemological difficulties requires stretching the definition of the genre to its utmost limits. The particularities of identity, time and space named by Ian Watt as essential characteristics of the novel,<sup>3</sup> are precisely the problematical areas for the author of L'innommable.

<sup>1</sup> Contemporary Playwrights: Samuel Beckett (1968), p.75.

<sup>2</sup> Israel Shenker, 'Moody Man of Letters', pp.1 & 3.

<sup>3</sup> 'Realism and the Novel Form', The Rise of the Novel (1957)

Those who hold, with George Steiner, that the novel is 'committed to secular reality',<sup>1</sup> would be obliged to exclude most, if not all, of Beckett's prose fiction. Nonetheless, the opening lines of L'innommable indicate that the book is concerned with the same fundamental preoccupations as those generally agreed upon as forming the basis of all novels -- 'Où maintenant? Quand maintenant? Qui maintenant?' (I,7) -- even if the questions it poses are destined to remain unanswered. For Beckett, 'Art has always been this -- pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric -- whatever else it may have been obliged by the "social reality" to appear'.<sup>2</sup> Paralysing scepticism, with its concomitant belief that all definitive statement is chicanery, results in his refusal to found this novel on a guaranteed initial situation, even one as destitute as that of Malone meurt. We are now totally confined to the inner world of the mind -- a mind conscious of nothing but itself. As Olga Bernal reminds us, 'ce qui se passe dans une tête, c'est le langage';<sup>3</sup> but it is a non-referential language, and L'innommable thus enters the realms of pure abstraction. Where hitherto the Beckettian narrator has used his story, or stories, as a means of maintaining

<sup>1</sup> 'Literature and Post-history', Language and Silence (1967) p.420; see also Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New Jersey 1957), pp.304-5, or Mary McCarthy, 'The Fact in Fiction', Partisan Review XXVII,3 (1960), p.439.

<sup>2</sup> 'Denis Devlin p.289.

<sup>3</sup> Langage et fiction dans le roman de Beckett (Paris 1969), p.54.



the flow of words and giving the monologue both substance and direction, if arbitrary, the Unnamable's stories never get off the ground, his images never become clear and dependable enough to develop anything on. Murphy's and Malone's death, Molloy's and Moran's hunt, Watt's inevitable departure, all provide some kind of end at which the narrative can aim, but the Unnamable's search for truth leads to the rejection of such artifices, so that his monologue is constantly on the verge of disintegration for want of temporal or formally organised direction. In L'innommable the chaos which in Beckett's view 'invades our experience at every moment',<sup>1</sup> is in danger of totally submerging the form in which art must frame it, if it is to remain art.

## II. Fictional World

The world of the third book of the Trilogy is one of words only, and is never permitted to assume a permanent physical form. It is not a visible world, so that its projection is obliged to fight a non-stop battle with the evocative tendency of language, just as the consciousness from which the novel's world emanates must seek its inner reality against the pressure of images with which its nature encumbers it. Since words inevitably characterise, the problem of conveying the abstract nature of the novel's framework is met by giving it as hazy a form as possible -- the

<sup>1</sup> 'Beckett by the Madeleine' p.23, speaking to Tom F. Driver.

first characteristic of the setting is darkness: 'sait-on jamais, dans une obscurité pareille?' (I,9) -- and systematically denying all facts as they occur -- 'Quelques pantins. Je les supprimerai par la suite' (I,9). This world defies particularisation. Unlike the preceding novels, each of which portrayed an openly fictional setting, the Unnamable's is the world in which fiction is created, peopled by the succession of fictional shapes in which he, as the creative consciousness, has conceived himself: 'A vrai dire, je les crois tous ici, à partir de Murphy tout au moins ... mais jusqu'à présent je n'ai aperçu que Malone' (I,11). It is only when it is given substance that this world too becomes fictional, and so its characterisation is avoided as much as possible. It is referred to as "là" or "ici", and if it inevitably expands in order to accommodate the images of people and things without which consciousness and language cannot subsist, the process is delayed and controlled by all feasible means. The first image, Malone, is denied solidity: 'C'est en le voyant, lui, que je me suis demandé si nous jetons une ombre. Impossible de le savoir'; and vision is severely restricted: 'Je le vois de la tête jusqu'à la taille. Il s'arrête à la taille, pour moi ... j'ignore s'il est debout ou à genoux' (I,10). The second characteristic of the setting is space, with its corollary time, although cyclical and unidentifiable: 'Malone passe devant moi à des intervalles sans doute réguliers' (I,10), 'L'endroit est sans doute vaste. De faibles lumières semblent marquer par

moments une manière de lointain' (I,11). But even the impression of distance is revoked by the description of the air as being 'D'un gris tout juste transparent dans mon voisinage immédiat' (I,26), and the suggestion that 'cet écran où mon regard se bute, tout en persistant à y voir de l'air, ne serait-ce pas plutôt l'enceinte, d'une densité de plombagine?' (I,26). The mind's propensity for establishing relations leads to the next development, permitted in hypothetical form as a means of feeding the monologue, but quickly negated to prevent over-identification of the narrative space: 'Y a-t-il d'autres fonds, plus bas? Auxquels on accède par celui-ci? ... Y a-t-il pour nous d'autres lieux prévus, dont celui où je suis, avec Malone, n'est que le narthex? ... Non, non, je nous sais tous ici pour toujours, depuis toujours' (I,11). The windowless monad is still fundamental to Beckett's conception of the mind of man: 'N'y a-t-il vraiment rien de changé depuis que je suis ici? Franchement ... à ma connaissance, rien' (I,15).<sup>1</sup>

Space, darkness and silence, then, constitute the initial données on which this novel is founded, the vacuum which the compulsive speaker is driven to fill. Into the space he introduces the notion of people and things -- 'Tiens, voilà le premier objet, le chapeau de Malone' (I,11); the darkness is broken by 'désordre des lumières peut-être une illusion' (I,16), and the

<sup>1</sup> The grotesque cosmic imagery -- 'il tourne ... autour de moi, comme la planète autour de son soleil' (I,15) -- parodies the grandeur of Leibnizian philosophy; see Fletcher, Art, p.136 for a brief discussion of Leibniz's influence.



silence by sound: 'après une période de silence immaculé, un faible cri se fit entendre' (I,17) -- and the concept of structured time creeps in. But all fictional developments are created ex nihilo and lay no claims to relate to an underlying reality. In his unformulated state, the Unnamable is content to believe himself at the centre of his universe, although the arbitrariness of this decision, and its lack of association with an objective truth, is apparent: 'le plus simple vraiment est de me considérer comme fixe et au centre de cet endroit, quelles qu'en soient la forme et l'étendue' (I,16). The development of incidentals related to self leads to a need for a more specific sense of location which in turn provokes more detailed characterisation of surroundings -- a tendency quickly corrected by revelation of the hypothetical nature of the discourse: 'mon siège semble être quelque peu surélevé, par rapport au niveau du sol environnant, si c'est du sol. C'est peut-être de l'eau, ou quelque autre liquide' (I,19-20). The whole structure is undermined by emphasising its temporary nature: 'aller plus loin, c'est m'en aller d'ici ... puis peu à peu tel que toujours, dans un autre endroit, où je me dirai avoir toujours été' (I,30-1). The conflict between truth and speech requires, if the monologue is to be sustained, the continual reformulation of the world. That these are images without basis in external reality is recalled to mind in the renewal of the old theme of the world within the head which runs through Beckett's work; as the Unnamable, or

creative consciousness, distinctly remembers, it is a world 'qui n'est peut-être que l'intérieur de mon crâne lointain, où autrefois j'errais, maintenant suis fixe' (I,31). All the first materialisations are short-lived: 'Ces gens n'ont jamais été. n'ont jamais été que moi et ce vide opaque. Et les bruits? Non plus, tout est silencieux ... il n'y a pas de lumières ici' (I,33); and once again the dark hollow of the novel's world, the world within its creator's head, becomes vulnerable to the invasion of images.

After the initial failure to keep the setting unspecific, evocations of the physical world slowly creep in: 'ma voix ... si faible, si lointaine ... comme la mer, comme la terre, une calme mer lointaine, mourant -- non, pas de ça, pas de grève, pas de rive, la mer suffit, assez de galets et de sable, assez de la terre, de la mer aussi' (I,44), although initially, as we can see, such images are promptly dismissed. The first comparatively stable picture of the external world is swiftly associated with previous fictional worlds used as settings for Beckettian pseudo-selves: 'Cette fois-ci je n'ai plus qu'une jambe' (I,57), the speaker announces, repeating the formula of the last two works -- 'cette fois je sais où je vais' (MM,9), 'Cette fois-ci, puis encore une' (Mo,9). As the self is irresistably coaxed into the fictional physique of Mahood, so the framework within which it conceives its existence assumes attributes of the visible world, and we see the hero 'clopinant ... à travers une nature ...

plutôt maigre et ... peu peuplée au départ' (I,59), 'en train de boucler le tour du monde' (I,61). The picture is still fairly general -- a bird's-eye view of the globe showing the Pacific, Sumatra and the Indian Ocean -- and finally concentrates on an unlocated rotunda containing Mahood's family, around which he circles, as time passes, and into which he finally penetrates. This image of a containing world, too, is summarily wiped out after several attempts at establishing a sequence of events in it, and the first uncharacterised space reappears: 'Mais laissons tout ça. Je n'ai jamais été ailleurs qu'ici, personne ne m'a jamais sorti d'ici' (I,75). A more ambiguous formulation replaces it, placing the memories of the implied author on the same level of reality as the setting of his latest avowed pseudo-self, Mahood: 'là-haut, dans l'île, au milieu de mes compatriotes, coreligionnaires, contemporains et copains ... L'île ... je n'ai jamais quitté l'île' (I,80).

Insubstantial memories of an unidentified consciousness are with ease swamped by the succeeding and most clearcut materialisation of the narrator's location that the novel contains: 'Piqué, à la manière d'une gerbe, dans une jarre profonde ... au bord d'une rue peu passante aux abords des abattoirs' (I,81).<sup>1</sup> But even such solid surroundings as these are soon revealed as illusory

<sup>1</sup> Professor Fletcher has actually traced the Parisian origins of which Mahood's detailed surroundings are composed -- Novels, p.184 -- so that the lack of distinction made between unadulterated memories and memories transmuted into fiction is not so illogical as might at first appear.



images only: 'déjà je commence à ne plus y être, dans cette rue de désastre, qu'ils m'ont si bien fait voir' (I,96).

Although a few more recognisable features are attributed to it -- 'A travers la grille, tout au fond d'une percée entre deux corps de bâtiment, le ciel m'apparaît' (I,110) -- the true nature of the novel's world once more emerges: 'Mais c'est uniquement une question de voix, tout autre image est à écarter' (I,123), and the visible setting becomes no more acceptable than the fictional pseudo-self which it was conceived to contain. As Mahood is rejected, so is his world, but with reluctance, since the attempts to conjure up images of an external world represent a hope of escape from the loneliness of solipsism -- a metaphysical view of Beckettian man held from the early days of Murphy: 'je ne tiens plus à quitter ce monde ... sans l'assurance d'y avoir été comme me la fournirait par exemple un coup de pied au cul, ou un baiser, peu importe la nature de l'attention, du moment que je ne peux me soupçonner d'en être l'auteur' (I,113).<sup>1</sup> In the end, however, Mahood's world must go, since it no more represents the true environment of the self than did Malone's or Molloy's: 'J'ai quitté, hier, le monde de Mahood, la rue, la gargote, la tuerie, la statue et, à travers la grille, le ciel comme un crayon d'ardoise.... Les histoires de Mahood sont terminées, il a compris qu'elles ne pouvaient être à mon sujet' (I,118-9).

<sup>1</sup> Murphy, that 'seedy solipsist' (M,59), used the same imagery to classify experience: 'the form of the kick was actual, that of the caress virtual' (M,76) -- for Murphy, of course, the solipsistic state was bliss not loneliness.

The next formulation attempts to hit a happy medium between the extreme abstraction of the setting for the dehumanised "I" and the unacceptable solidity of the Rue Brancion, Mahood's final location. The narrator's attempts to be Worm, the self in existence without defining attributes, immediately call for the substantiation of an environment: 'Vite un endroit. Sans accès, sans issue, endroit sûr' (I,126). But the voice wavers between the Unnamable and Worm as centre of consciousness so that the setting is 'Tantôt dans une tête, tantôt dans un ventre ... et tantôt nulle part en particulier' (I,134). The shifting outlines of the speaker entail fluctuations in the concept of the world which contains him. At one moment 'Le voilà maintenant dans un gouffre' (I,146), then 'ce n'est pas un gouffre, ça n'a pas traîné, un peu plus et il sera juché sur une éminence' (I,147). The unidentified 'eux et ... fantoches analogues' (I,147) who surround and threaten Worm's world (a nightmarish progression from the named and therefore harmless 'souffre-douleurs': I,33, who circle the Unnamable) are not permitted to populate it: 'drôle d'enfer, non chauffé, non peuplé, c'est peut-être le paradis' (I,148). It can only be defined by what it is not: 'pas de végétaux, pas de minéraux, pas d'animaux, seulement Worm, de règne inconnu' (I,156-7). Worldly imagery, 'Ce sera le cachot, c'est le cachot, ça a toujours été le cachot' (I,167-8), gives way briefly to the familiar concretised abstraction: 'c'est une tête, je suis dans une tête, quelle illumination, psssit,

aussitôt arrosée' (I,174). As the narrator says, 'Côté spectacle, ça semble maigre' (I,151), and it is not long before all the hollow images are brushed aside once more: 'Il n'y a rien ici, rien à voir, rien qui voie' (I,180).

Just as Worm is the last extended attempt to objectivise the subject, so the novel provides no more substantial containers, although the urge to let a framework materialise remains: 'Parler d'un monde à moi, dit aussi intérieur, sans étrangler' (I,212). Images are never more than a manner of speaking, and a manner to be avoided at that: 'nous n'allons pas retomber dans le genre picaresque' (I,216). If the tendency of language to represent is continually active,<sup>1</sup> it is now reduced to simple, unverifiable hypothesising: 'C'est peut-être le paradis, c'est peut-être la terre, c'est peut-être les rives d'un lac sous la terre ... ce n'est pas sûr, on ne voit rien, on n'entend rien, on entend le long baiser de l'eau morte et de la boue' (I,216-7) -- here the temporary formulation in which Comment c'est will be set makes its first appearance. The world of men is a dream -- 'là-haut rien qu'à une vingtaine de brasses les hommes vont et viennent, on y songe, dans son long songe il y a place pour les éveillés' (I,217) -- as it was for Malone and Molloy, but the alienation here is even greater in that the images are denied relationship with the subject; the eyes which might see them

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed consideration of the representative force of language see Olga Bernal, 'Le dilemme de la représentation', Langage et fiction dans le roman de Beckett, pp.114-142.



'ne sont pas les miens, les miens sont finis' (I,217), the dream is not his: 'pas de tête non plus ... dans sa tête non plus il ne va nulle part' (I,217). The frightening abstraction of the closing pages of the novel sees the discourse in constant danger of failing for want of solidity: 'j'ai failli caler. A moi, à moi, si je pouvais décrire cet endroit, moi qui réussis si bien dans les descriptions d'endroits, ... si je pouvais me mettre dans une chambre, c'en serait fini de la chasse aux mots' (I,230). Settings of past novels are recalled only to be rejected as irrelevant:

l'endroit d'abord, après je m'y trouverai, je m'y introduirai, bien solide, ... cette mer sous ma fenêtre ... et le fleuve, et la baie, ... et les étoiles ... ou la forêt, ... ce sont de bons moments, pour qui n'a pas à dire, Mais ce n'est pas moi, ... où est-ce que je suis, qu'est-ce que je fais, pendant ce temps ... on essaie la mer, on essaie la ville, on se cherche dans la montagne ... on se veut dans son coin (I,231-2)<sup>1</sup>

Reaction to uncertainty brings the outlines of a new story, unrelated to self, set in comfortable, solid surroundings -- a house, a railway-station, recalling Mr. Hackett's world -- but even its tenuous justification as a reminder of forgotten reality is denied: 'est-ce le retour au monde fabuleux, non, seulement un rappel, pour que je regrette ce que j'ai perdu ... malheureusement ça ne me rappelle rien' (I,246-7). In the end the speaker is left in a world of words which have been proven incapable of conjuring up a physical reality, a solid, defining setting essential

<sup>1</sup> The quest theme related to the Beckettian heroes in the earlier novels is here revealed as symbolic of the quest of the implied author, using his art to find the truth about the human condition.

to the formulation of an existing self: 'c'est une image, ce sont des mots ... je ne suis pas dehors, je suis dedans, dans quelque chose, je suis enfermé ... il n'y a qu'ici, et le silence dehors ... pas besoin de murs, si il faut des murs, il m'en faut, bien épais, il me faut une prison' (I,253). But prison, womb, head, sky and earth, all images of a containing world fail in this novel and we are left with the final admission of the impossibility of formulating a setting for the self: 'là où je suis, je ne sais pas, je ne le saurai jamais, dans le silence on ne sait pas' (I,262).

### III. The Speaker

The narrator in L'innommable has an even less distinct sense of identity than in Malone meurt. Where the "I" of the latter was shifting and all-embracing, establishing a common origin for multiple facets of being, the "I" of this last novel of the Trilogy is undependable, disowned by the creative consciousness, and shown up as a linguistic convenience -- 'Dire je. Sans le penser' (I,7) -- or indeed imposition, with no referential value.<sup>1</sup> The Unnamable's struggle to bring the self into the world exemplifies to perfection the logical difficulties inherent in the humanistic concept of the self as capable of being considered as an object of study, so much objected to by Structuralists.<sup>2</sup> The

<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the use of the title "the Unnamable" in critical discussion must be seen as a linguistic convenience, designating as it does an area of being beyond the reach of language.

<sup>2</sup> See Peter Caws, 'What is Structuralism?', Partisan Review XXXV,1 (Winter 1968), pp.75-91; esp. pp.82-3.

dynamics of the novel depend upon its creator's refusal to bow before the logic of the statement that 'The subject cannot be the object of science because it is its subject'.<sup>1</sup> The book thus consists of a succession of attempts to formulate the subject, each foredoomed to failure, being a logical impossibility. From a metaphysical point of view, Edith Kern sets forth the problem with great clarity: 'As his intelligence differentiates and defines the forms in which Being discloses itself, the essential character of Being -- becoming -- is destroyed: life is turned into death; man into an object; the Self into something from which the Self has escaped'.<sup>2</sup>

Stripped of externals, the reigning consciousness in L'innommable becomes representative of all human consciousness. There are no particularising attributes to prevent the reader's total identification with it, and each effort to give it a form to distinguish it from the rest of humanity results only in fictional creation. Even the most unambitious claims to substantiality, 'ici je ne peux compter strictement que sur mon corps, mon corps incapable du moindre mouvement' (I,27), are quickly proven false. No longer does the narrator claim to incorporate all preceding Beckettian protagonists, as did Malone. They, together with the incarnations of the present book, Basile, Mahood

<sup>1</sup> Peter Caws, 'What is Structuralism?', p.85.

<sup>2</sup> Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett, p.172.



and Worm, are indeed 'plutôt le même sale individu s'amusant à paraître multiple' (I,132), but their very mutability reveals the contingency of the elements which compose them and the gulf between externals and the essential self. Although continually tempted to identify with them, in order to bring himself into existence, the speaker always ends up by disowning them. Identification of the narrator with the implied author, on the other hand, is far more complete here than in previous novels; and even when distinctive authorial references appear -- 'Bally je ne sais plus quoi, endroit qui à les en croire, m'aurait infligé le jour' (I,21)<sup>1</sup> -- they never interfere with the anonymity of the subject. The memories and style which make up this speaker's mode of expression are indeed particular to himself, but such accidentals disguise rather than reveal the core of self; his inner being is hidden beneath them, and they must be peeled away if he is to reach the essence of self.

The Unnamable's first image of self, the most rudimentary and persistent of the novel, has clear associations with the implied author: 'j'ai toujours été assis à cette même place, les mains sur les genoux, regardant devant moi comme un grand-duc dans une volière' (I,12). This is an acceptable description of the initial physical sensations of self of any solipsistic writer, and the logic behind it is irrefutable: 'Je me sais assis, les mains sur les genoux, à cause de la pression contre

<sup>1</sup> The Irish for Dublin is Baile Atha Cliath.

mes fesses, contre les plantes de mes pieds, contre mes mains, contre mes genoux' (I,34). The introspective search for truth, however, reacting to the fact-producing urge of the narrative, simplifies the form even further:

je suis vraiment baigné de larmes. Elles s'accumulent dans ma barbe ... -- non, je n'ai pas de barbe, pas de cheveux non plus, c'est une grande boule lisse que je porte sur les épaules, sans linéaments, sauf les yeux, dont il ne reste plus que les orbites. Et sans la lointaine évidence de mes paumes, de mes plantes, dont je n'ai pas encore su me débarrasser, je me donnerais volontiers la forme, sinon la consistance, d'un oeuf (I,35-6).

And the inward thrust soon penetrates beyond the range of sensations, so that the subject's sense of self is reduced to 'une grande boule parlante' (I,37). Where Malone's sense of relationship to his surroundings altered periodically, the Unnamable has none at all, and his self-location is empty postulation only: 'Mettons donc que je sois fixe quoique cela n'ait pas d'importance, que je sois fixe ou que roulant je change sans cesse de place ... puisque je ne sens rien, ni quiétude ni changement, rien qui puisse servir de point de départ à une opinion' (I,39). He is even disconnected from the voice or flow of words: 'Cette voix qui parle ... Elle n'est pas la mienne, je n'en ai pas, je n'ai pas de voix et je dois parler ... avec cette voix qui n'est pas la mienne, mais qui ne peut être que la mienne, puisqu'il n'y a que moi' (I,40). The consequent disintegration of the subject, bringing a retreat into abstraction, raises the problem of maintaining the discourse which abstraction deprives of sustenance, besides, as we shall see, that of pinpointing narrative responsibility:

'Je vais ... être obligé, afin de ne pas tarir, d'inventer encore une féerie, avec des têtes, des troncs, des bras, des jambes et tout ce qui s'ensuit' (I,41); the writer for whom the self is the only remaining legitimate subject-matter is constantly faced with the need to create fictional pseudo-selves in order to keep writing. The least substantial of the novel's images for the self -- this uncharacterised being from whom the words pour, fixed in the centre of an undefined space<sup>1</sup> -- is nonetheless fictional (even if associated with the implied author, since the notion of an implied author is in itself a product of fiction), so that ultimately it too can be peeled away and referred to as 'l'autre qui passe pour moi' (I,41); the true self lies deeper still.

Basile is the name given to the first "fairyland" product on whom responsibility is laid for the disowned, fact-bearing voice. Initially introduced as head of a team of tempters into belief in the historicity of the self -- 'Ils me faisaient des cours sur l'amour, sur l'intelligence, précieux, précieux' (I,21) -- he is a pseudo-self like Molloy and Malone before him, even if no longer able to coax the narrator to identify with him: 'Usurpe-t-il encore mon nom, celui qu'ils m'ont collé, dans leur siècle ...? Non, non, ici je suis en sûreté' (I,22). Although denounced as fictional -- 'Et Basile et consorts? Inexistants, inventés

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Hamm's implied self-description in Fin de partie: 'assis quelque part, petit plein perdu dans le vide' (FP,53).



pour expliquer je ne sais plus quoi' (I,34) -- he continues to be used to explain the presence of notions of everyday life -- 'Années, c'est une idée à Basile' (I,43) -- which are thus rejected as irrelevancies, until the Unnamable arbitrarily decides to change his name: 'Décidément Basile prend de l'importance. Je vais donc l'appeler Mahood plutôt, j'aime mieux ça' (I,44).<sup>1</sup>

It is with the more clearcut formulation of Mahood that the irresistible urge of the immaterial subject to identify with an incarnate being begins to make itself felt: 'C'est lui qui me racontait des histoires sur moi, vivait pour moi, sortait de moi, revenait vers moi, rentrait dans moi, m'agonisait d'histoires.... C'est sa voix qui s'est souvent, toujours, mêlée à la mienne, au point quelquefois de la couvrir tout à fait' (I,44). The loyalties of the subject fluctuate and, until Mahood's stories get well under way, are easily transferred back to the early, unidentified image of self: 'Mais moi je me serais endormi tout à fait, la bouche ouverte, comme d'habitude ... Et de ma bouche ouverte, endormie, couleraient les mensonges, sur moi' (I,46). Mahood, like his predecessors, is a 'représentant en existence' (I,56) for the Unnamable or real self. Not only is he clearly presented as an invention, but he must take his place as one of many such attempts to objectivise the subject: 'j'arriverai

<sup>1</sup> Malone as author revealed the same lack of respect for proper names, and both he and the Unnamable change their characters' names to ones with a more general reference -- Sapo becomes Macmann (son of man), and Basile becomes Ma/n/hood. This is in striking contrast to the recognised function of names in the traditional novel, which aims at particularisation; see Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel, pp.18-19.

presque peut-être, à coups de mutilations, d'ici une quinzaine de générations d'homme, à faire figure de moi, parmi les passants' (I,56). If the Unnamable identifies with him, the wording makes it obvious that the identification as well as the formulation are transitory arrangements: 'Il m'a dit comment il est, comment je suis, tous me l'ont dit ... Cette fois-ci je n'ai plus qu'une jambe, tout en ayant rajeuni, paraît-il' (I,57). As we already remarked, this echoes both Malone's and Molloy's turn of phrase when introducing their respective stories. They are thus placed, in retrospect, on the same footing as Mahood, and must be seen as temporary and unsatisfactory formulations of the sense of inner being of the creative consciousness. Even in Malone meurt, however, where the identity of the speaker is far less assured than in the earlier novels, the narrator allowed a single physical presence to dominate -- viz. Malone's; but the Unnamable's intensified self-awareness keeps the whole process of fictional creation on the surface, so that the only condition on which the self is permitted to identify with a materialisation is prior exposure of the misrepresentation involved. Even if he portrays himself as deceived into momentary belief that he and his 'avatars accomplis' (I,58) are one, the reader is well warned of the dissimulation: 'Ils me colleraient un anus artificiel aux creux de la main que je ne serais pas là, vivant de leur vie d'homme presque ... Pourtant il m'a semblé quelquefois être là, moi, aux endroits incriminés ... Oui, plus d'une fois j'ai manqué me prendre

pour l'autre' (I,58).

All through the narration of the stories attempting to historicise the subject, language betrays the confused sense of identity which obtains. Mahood is referred to now in the first person, now in the third: 'D'après Mahood je ne suis jamais arrivé ... D'ailleurs ce n'est plus moi. Qui sait s'il arrivera jamais ... Ma jambe en moins leur était indifférente' (I,63-4). But momentary absorption brings swift repudiation, not only of Mahood but of all his predecessors: 'Je ne suis, est-ce besoin de le dire, ni Murphy, ni Watt, ni Mercier ... ni aucun des autres ... qui m'ont dit que j'étais eux' (I,79) -- the identity of the consciousness portrayed in L'innommable as that of the overall creator of the Beckettian novels is by now irrefutable. The arbitrary characteristics of the pseudo-selves, highlighting their fictional nature, are emphasised by the narrator's willingness to change not only their name, as Basile became Mahood, but even their appearance and situation, in mid-stream. Thus from a one-legged traveller Mahood is reduced to a limbless trunk, only his head visible, the rest 'Piqué, à la manière d'une gerbe, dans une jarre profonde, dont les bords m'arrivent jusqu'à la bouche' (I,81) -- surely the most grotesque and dehumanised image of self yet formulated.<sup>1</sup> However, the

<sup>1</sup> The isolation of the head comes as close as one can come to a physical representation of the mind -- the little world in which all Beckett's French novels are set; and he will use the device again in Play to evoke three inner worlds on stage.

Michael Robinson, The Long Sonata of The Dead, points out that Mahood in his jar 'is also an image of that backward birth, the attempt to "Die alive," which Malone was seeking', and he also relates the image to 'the memory of Proust's vases suspended outside time', to set it with Murphy's chair and Malone's bed as 'centres of their narratives where temporal and infinite meet' (p.198).



multi-levelled awareness of the narrator permits ironic comment on the illogicalities of the creative process as seen in the perspective of the succession of works of fiction it has produced:

Il m'est ainsi loisible de supposer que l'unijambiste manchot de tout à l'heure et le tronc à tête de poisson où je suis actuellement en panne ne constituent bel et bien que deux aspects d'une seule et même enveloppe charnelle, l'âme étant notoirement à l'abri des ablations et délabrements ... Mais que dire de cette autre vieillesse dont ils m'ont gratifié ... et de cette autre maturité, auxquelles il ne manquait ni bras ni jambes (I,88-9).

Mahood fails, just as his predecessors failed, to bring the self properly into the world, to hold on to the Unnamable's allegiance long enough for him to believe in his own existence so that it can come to an end; as Malone discovered before him, life is necessary before death can annihilate: 'Cela a toujours été ainsi. Juste au moment où le monde est en place et que je crois entrevoir le moyen de le quitter, tout se dissipe. Cet endroit où ma jarre s'élève ... je n'ai pas su m'y accrocher' (I,96). That information concerning Mahood has had no true bearing on the subject is soon openly admitted once again: 'Car sur moi proprement dit ... il me semble qu'on ne m'a encore rien dit' (I,100). The most distinct image for the self having been unable to attract the Unnamable into a belief that he exists, one of the rare admissions of non-existence follows: 'Donc rien sur moi ... Mais pas le moindre renseignement, sinon ... que je ne suis en mesure d'en recevoir aucun, n'étant pas là, ce que je savais déjà' (I,100). If there is a united self to be found beneath the proliferation of images, it can only exist at a far

deeper level of awareness than has yet been reached, in a different world as it were: 'Je suis celui qu'on n'aura pas, qui ne sera pas délivré ... nous serions cent qu'il nous faudrait être cent et un. Je nous manquerai toujours' (I,106). Mahood continues to figure for some time and even to claim periodic identification with the speaker, but no hope of conviction remains after such categoric disownment.

Worm, the next creation, may be seen as an attempt to embody the self as objectivised Being, where Mahood attracted the self as perceiver: 'Worm ne peut rien noter.... c'est le propre ... de Mahood de noter' (I,107). Where the latest appearances of Mahood depict him as preoccupied with the need for a witness to guarantee his existence -- 'Comment se fait-il que les gens ne me remarquent pas?' (I,110) -- associated with the need to prove life in order to experience death, or to die in order to have wholly existed -- 'Et naîtrai enfin dans un dernier soupir' (I,113) -- all recurrent Beckettian themes, Worm exists by right of being perceived and has no sense of subjective existence as Mahood has: 'Ne sentant rien, ne sachant rien, il existe pourtant, mais pas pour lui, pour les hommes, ce sont les hommes qui le conçoivent et qui disent, Worm est là, puisque nous le concevons' (I,121).<sup>1</sup> Worm

<sup>1</sup> Professor Coe sees Worm as the materialisation of the Sartrean concept of the "pour-soi", and in this he is followed by Michael Robinson. However, Professor Coe's own definition of "l'être" or "l'en-soi" as being 'all that massively exists' (Coe, p.74) might be more appropriate for Worm should we view his subsequent sprouting of ears, eyes, etc. as representing awakening consciousness, as perceived by the Other, rather than the acquisition of the attributes of consciousness as perceived by the self. Other phrases also set Worm closer to the "en-soi", but essentially the distinction is unhelpful; Worm is existence prior to consciousness, rather than opposed to consciousness.

is Beckett's most revolutionary attempt to find a form for Being and to explore 'that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unuseable',<sup>1</sup> artistic aims which he spoke of to both Israel Shenker and Lawrence Harvey. As the Unnamable indicates, 'avant Mahood il y eut d'autres comme lui ... Mais Worm est le premier de son espèce' (I,103). All previous Beckettian heroes originated in efforts to incarnate the creative consciousness, and none succeeded in acquiring objective existence; but Worm is to be the object of consciousness, pure being characterised only by a name ('Sans noms propres, pas de salut': I,103), and if the creative consciousness can succeed in slipping into him then the materialisation and re-integration of the self, perceiver and perceived, may be achieved. It is this dichotomous sense of self which underlies the apparent contradictions involved in the subject's wavering between its fictional offspring: 'Car si je suis Mahood, je suis Worm aussi. Plof. Ou si je ne suis pas encore Worm, je le serai, en n'étant plus Mahood. Plof.' (I,104). The whole problem of the subject's identification with Worm lies in the latter's lack of subjectivity: 'Ses sens ne lui apprennent rien, ni sur lui, ni sur le reste, et cette distinction lui est étrangère' (I,121), so that 'si j'étais Worm je ne le saurais pas' (I,123).

The series of changes which the amorphous Worm undergoes, then, may be seen as efforts to accord him perception: 'Ne sentant

<sup>1</sup> Israel Shenker, 'Moody Man of Letters', p.3; see also Harvey, pp.435-436.



rien, ne sachant rien, ne pouvant rien, ne voulant rien. Jusqu'au moment où il entend ce bruit qui ne cessera plus. Alors c'est la fin, Worm n'est plus' (I,126). Once he can hear, he is no longer Worm, and his creator is forced to admit it, although the need to feed the monologue encourages the speaker to overlook this fact, at least until the topic can be altered: 'On le sait, mais on ne le dit pas, on dit que c'est le réveil, le commencement, de Worm, car il faut parler, maintenant il faut parler de Worm' (I,126). This "passe-passe" is used to permit verbal identification: 'Où suis-je? C'est là ma première pensée, après une vie d'écoute. De cette question ... je rebondirai vers d'autres' (I,127), at least at a hypothetical level. But admission of consciousness brings reversion to the original nameless image of self, and the relation of the self to the notion of the unconscious Worm becomes its relationship with the unborn foetus in which it had its origin: 'il me semble me rappeler, et que je ne l'oublierai jamais, comment j'étais, quand j'étais lui, avant que tout soit devenu confus. Mais cela est naturellement impossible, puisque Worm ne pouvait savoir comment il était, ni qui il était' (I,131).<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Harvey quotes Beckett as saying that 'perhaps the most perfect expression of Being ... would be an ejaculation',<sup>2</sup> which also suggests that Worm is given the form

<sup>1</sup> The significance of Peggy Guggenheim's revelations concerning Beckett's pre-birth recollections is clear here, so that it seems fair to consider Worm, in part, as the working out, through art, of a life-long obsession -- a fine example of the artist's ability to blend personal experience and philosophical reflection to produce a work of art.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey, p.441.

of pre-natal being, which can be if not perceived at least conceived by others (no pun intended), while itself incapable of perception. Thus, since consciousness comes with birth, 'Mahood, je n'ai pas su mourir. Worm, vais-je être foutu de naître?' (I,133).

As with Mahood, verbal allegiance of the inner self with Worm switches back and forth: 'Il sait que ce sont des mots ... Oui, je sais que ce sont des mots' (I,138), but as a linguistic convenience only; so that soon the speaker resolves: 'Je ne dirai plus moi ... c'est trop bête' (I,139).<sup>1</sup> The failure of Worm to incarnate the self, to give a form to elemental Being which lies beneath consciousness, brings a similar despair of existence as did Mahood's failure: 'Ça ne changera rien. Il n'y a que moi, moi qui ne suis pas, là où je suis' (I,139) -- the truth about self is inexpressible, the self is unnamable. Again the abstraction of self-contemplation sends the subject fleeing back to his "féerie", to Worm, and further attempts to humanise him: 'Il lui a poussé une tête, depuis l'oreille, pour qu'il enrage mieux' (I,141) -- rage, an expression of pain, being equated with life -- although human characteristics are still kept to a minimum: 'il ne fait qu'entendre, que souffrir, sans comprendre, ça doit être possible' (I,141). Next 'Dans le tas un oeil, hagard, chevalin' (I,143), and then the joy of physical

<sup>1</sup> Malone's 'je ne dirai plus je' (MM,208) assumes, in retrospect, overtones of despair in his self-abandonment to the fictional life of his pseudo-selves.

feeling is permitted, although still 'cette joie, Worm ne la connaîtra qu'obscurément, étant moins qu'une bête' (I,144). But in the end Worm remains an insubstantial creation of the impersonalised words that make up the discourse -- 'ces fantômes parlants' (I,179) -- and the reigning consciousness insists on sustained awareness of the chasm between language and objective reality: 'Le tort qu'ils ont, c'est de parler de Worm comme s'il existait réellement, dans un endroit déterminé, alors que tout cela n'est encore qu'à l'état de projet' (I,173). Ultimately Worm merges with the basic image of self: 'Il est chauve, il est nu, et ses mains, posées une fois pour toutes à plat sur ses genoux, ne risquent aucun vilain jeu' (I,180), so that, although he is the named topic, the referential value of his name is openly questioned: 'Je me demande sur quoi roule l'émission en ce moment. Sur Worm vraisemblablement' (I,180). Thus all images for the inner self are negated in his negation: 'L'oeil non plus je n'y crois pas, il n'y a rien ici, rien à voir, rien qui voie' (I,180).

With Worm and Mahood dismissed from the Unnamable's story -- 'que viens-je faire dans ces histoires de Mahood et de Worm, ou plutôt que viennent-ils faire dans la mienne' (I,183) -- the apparently autonomous words revert to attempted substantiation of the creative consciousness: 'être sans identité, c'est une honte' (I,184), 'rester sans forme, quelle pitié' (I,185). A photograph of a typical Beckettian character -- 'cette tête de



crevé ... ouie en baisse ... odorat en baisse' (I,184) -- with a potted history, is rejected and gives way to the despairing image of 'un sperme qui meurt, de froid, dans les draps' (I,189) -- again the ejaculation imagery for being, but deprived of the possibility of worldly life. But even this sterile form is more than the Unnamable can hope for: 'il y a des gens qui ont de la chance, nés d'un rêve lubrique ... morts avant l'aube ... non, elle n'est pas descendue, la couille qui veille de moi' (I,189)<sup>1</sup> -- and the harsh language reflects the underlying bitterness against the human condition. Each concretisation is followed by denials and lapses into abstraction: 'il n'y a jamais eu rien, à tirer de ces histoires ... ils verront que je n'en ai pas [d'histoire] non plus ... je finirai par les engueuler peut-être, ils sauront ce que c'est que d'être un sujet de conversation' (I,190). The next attempt at self-definition is even less substantial: 'il y a un dehors et un dedans et moi au milieu, c'est peut-être ça que je suis, la chose qui divise le monde en deux, d'une part le dehors, de l'autre le dedans ... je suis la cloison, j'ai deux faces et pas d'épaisseur' (I,196). From a central core of pure being -- 'Ce qu'ayant de moins changeant on croit avoir de plus réel' (I,122) -- reached for in the image of Worm, then, the Unnamable retreats to the boundary of the inner world; he returns to the level of consciousness, driven back by the

<sup>1</sup> Moran's apparently irrelevant reference to flies 'qui éclosent au début de l'hiver ... et qui meurent peu de temps après ... sans avoir pu pondre' (Mo,257), clearly has its place in this context.

silence of the inner void.

Preceding heroes, as compulsive writers, equated consciousness and the flow of words, and Malone has already hinted at the tendency of language to drown its subject in its own reality; it is accordingly a perfectly logical development for the Unnamable to feel that the self is lost in the words which formulate it.<sup>1</sup> Since language belongs to all men, and is not particular to the individual whom it nonetheless determines, self-possession and self-definition become impossible and the expressed self must always be the property of the Other: 'je suis en mots, je suis fait de mots, des mots des autres' (I,204).<sup>2</sup> And this terrifying concept of the nature of self as lost to the self and hidden from consciousness by the very structure of that consciousness, forms the climax of the novel: 'des mots, je suis tous ces mots, tous ces étrangers, cette poussière de verbe' (I,204). However, the cool logic which forces the admission that the self is a linguistic structure only cannot overcome the emotional conviction that an inner self exists, somewhere, somehow.<sup>3</sup> Each

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Molloy's 'je me posais volontiers des questions, l'une après l'autre ... afin de me croire toujours là' (Mo,74), and Malone's 'mes notes ont une fâcheuse tendance ... à faire disparaître tout ce qui est censé en faire l'objet' (MM,162).

<sup>2</sup> This is the natural emotional reaction to the realisation, clinically expressed by the Structuralists, that 'the subject, first of all, is a linguistic category, the "vantage" of verbs in the first person' (see Peter Caws, 'What is Structuralism?', p.83).

<sup>3</sup> From this point of view Beckett's claim, 'Je ne suis pas un intellectuel. Je ne suis que sensibilité' (Gabriel d'Aubarede, 'En attendant Beckett', p.7) makes perfect sense. In terms of the concept of human nature depicted in his work, Beckett is clearly the forerunner of the 'Nouveau roman' practitioners. Intellectually he too rejects the density attributed to man in the traditional notion of character, and it is the pertinacity with which the emotions cling to it that provides a major part of his subject-matter.

pseudo-self and his world is invented to give substance to the discourse aimed at self-expression: 'C'est moi qui l'ai inventé Mahood, lui et tant d'autres, et les endroits où ils passaient ... afin de pouvoir parler' (I,223); but the subterfuge cannot work because it is recognised: 'faisons comme si j'étais seul au monde, alors que j'en suis le seul absent' (I,235). This true self which logic denies lies beneath the images, beneath the words, so that the use of the first person which attaches the self to language is readily abandoned: 'me voilà l'absent, c'est son tour, celui qui ne parle ni n'écoute ... il est fait de silence ... il est dans le silence ... il n'a pas d'histoire, il n'a pas été dans l'histoire' (I,258-9). And so the Unnamable remains at his impossible task -- attempting to put the self, silence and absence, into words: 'il faut dire des mots ... jusqu'à ce qu'ils me trouvent' (I,261), to bring the atemporal into time.

#### IV. Story

It is clear when one traces the history of the Unnamable's struggle to formulate the self -- revealed through a consideration of the concept of human nature on which the novel is built -- that this succession of failures to identify the protagonist is the book's sole subject, and if one is to use the word story at all, it must be used in this context. Events must here be seen as pure hypotheses, movements of the mind only, completely



unrelated to external reality; and the time-sequence in which they unfold is that of the creative consciousness and not a separate structure created by it. The story and the telling are one: 'Ce qui se passe, ce sont des mots' (I,119). Each materialisation of self is given the rudiments of a story in the traditional sense -- the basic image sees the colliding forms ('un incident qui ne s'est produit qu'une seule fois': I,19), the flickering lights, the sounds; Mahood has the death of his family, the comings and goings of Marguerite (or Madeleine -- either there are two women or one whose name changes back and forth), the progressive physical restrictions; Worm has his series of bodily transformations. But these scattered events intermingle and fail to order themselves in coherent time-schemes, so that they never appear as more than games of the creative consciousness, distracting attention from the lack of historicity of the self. Mahood's varying accounts of his family's death are openly mocked, each purporting to tell how 'les choses se sont réellement passées' (I,72<sup>varied</sup>73), followed by the derisive 'Cette version des événements rétablie, il ne reste plus qu'à remarquer qu'elle ne vaut pas plus cher que l'autre ... Voyons maintenant comment les choses se sont passées en réalité' (I,74). Aristotelian dependence on story, as a means of structuring the narrative, is ironically recognised from the start: 'Je dois supposer un commencement à mon séjour ici, ne serait-ce que pour la commodité du récit' (I,16). But the setting of a beginning

to the discourse is an admitted trick, being the arbitrary election of a point of interruption in a continuous flow of words; it is only as a printed novel that the work requires a beginning: 'Mais je suis obligé de commencer. C'est-à-dire que je suis obligé de continuer' (I,9). The contrast between the impotence and ignorance of the artist responsible for the Unnamable's aborted story<sup>1</sup> and the fluency and excitement required for a "good story" is amusingly underlined with the sudden introduction of the outlines of a tale of an unexpectedly returning war hero who finds his wife re-married -- a tale full of emotion, tragedy and suspense -- 'en voilà une histoire' (I,246). The creative consciousness is aware of the requirements of a good story, but is unable to supply them here. An Aristotelian end is, of course, impossible to manoeuvre; words consistently fail to meet the artist's intent -- 'essayer qu'ils me portent dans mon histoire' (I,260) -- so that, although the page ceases to record, it is clear that the flow of words remains unstemmed: 'il faut continuer, je vais continuer' (I,262) is the final recorded utterance.

#### V. Narrative Movement

Like Malone meurt before it, the movement of L'Innommable is linear; but it lacks the sense of direction which impending

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Beckett's words to Israel Shenker: 'I'm working with impotence, ignorance' ('Moody Man of Letters', p.3).

death gives the former: 'Aller de l'avant, appeler ça aller, appeler ça de l'avant' (I,7), 'En avant. C'est facile à dire. Mais où est l'avant?' (I,166). It is only linear because essentially the novel is a verbal structure and the movement of the written word is linear. However, the circular movement prevalent in all Beckett's work is never far from the surface here either. As in Malone meurt, it appears in the sub-fictions, which include all substantiations in the present work. The world of the nameless image of self is so organised both spatially -- 'Malone tourne ... autour de moi, comme la planète autour de son soleil' (I,15) -- and temporally: 'J'ai dit qu'ici tout se répète tôt ou tard, non, j'allais le dire, puis je me suis ravisé' (I,24). Mahood, while still mobile, is 'probablement empêtré dans une sorte de spirale renversée' (I,59); and when memories of the implied author blend into the narrative the motion alters slightly: 'Ce n'est pas une spirale, mon chemin, là aussi je me suis gouré, mais des boucles irrégulières' (I,81). The immobilised Mahood at least allows the possibility that the time in which he claims to exist may be cyclical, so that instead of the appearance of a new pseudo-self when his story is finished he could as easily be called upon to repeat it: 'Quand j'arriverai à mourir ... ils seront mieux en mesure de juger si je mérite d'illustrer une autre époque, ou de refaire la présente' (I,88). The concept of Worm is that of Being prior to subjugation to time and space, but, once trapped into living, the same future



lies in store for him as for Mahood: 'On s'occupera de la mise en circonvolutions plus tard, quand on l'aura sorti de là' (I,141).

While the actual writing progresses linearly, and image succeeds image with no indication that they can combine to form a circular and therefore repeatable whole, yet the idea that nothing new is being said, that each story is repetition, all stories one and the same, is ever present: 'murmurant mes vieilles histoires, ma vieille histoire, comme pour la première fois' (I,31), 'je raconterai une vieille histoire de Mahood, n'importe laquelle, elles sont toutes pareilles' (I,219).<sup>1</sup> Earlier heroes have shared this attitude to their stories, but here the repetitive process is speeded up so that we see a succession of attempts to formulate the self within a single work, instead of giving each major pseudo-self a novel or section to himself as heretofore. And in the present work, the horror of the artist's need to write, knowing he can say nothing new, and cannot say what he wants, also comes to the fore. Death renders all apparent differences in life meaningless, so that each account of it is at heart the same as any other.<sup>2</sup> Each story ended is a story to be begun, so that the end cannot be welcome because of 'l'obligation où je

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Molloy's 'on n'invente rien ... on ne fait que balbutier sa leçon, des bribes d'un pensum appris et oublié' (Mo,46), or Moran's 'il est même possible qu'on ne soit pas trop à cheval sur le chemin qu'il emprunte du moment qu'il arrive à bon port ... Et qui sait s'il ne croit pas à chaque fois que c'est la première. Cela l'entretiendrait dans l'espoir... Tandis que se voir récidiver sans fin, cela vous remplit d'aise' (Mo,206).

<sup>2</sup> A concept which obviously has its place in the Beckettian theme of the identification of opposites or ultimate sameness of things.

serai, une fois débarrassé, de recommencer, à partir de nulle part, de personne et de rien, pour y aboutir à nouveau, par des voies nouvelles bien sûr, ou par les anciennes, chaque fois méconnaissables' (I,30). Thus, as the novel draws to a close, its starting point of nowhere, no-one and nothing, may be said to be at hand: 'la fin je la sens proche et le commencement itou' (I,229).

#### VI. Narrative Control

The problem of narrative control must be viewed from a different perspective in L'innommable than that of the earlier novels, since the progressive disintegration of the hero has reached the point where he no longer claims any responsibility for the language, which now appears to be self-generating: 'Cette voix qui parle, se sachant mensongère ... Elle sort de moi, elle me remplit ... elle n'est pas la mienne, je ne peux pas l'arrêter, je ne peux pas l'empêcher, de me déchirer, de me secouer, de m'assiéger' (I,40). Discrepancy between narrative intent and result is almost always remarked on by earlier narrators, who assumed they would concord. But the Unnamable appears unperturbed when his resolution: 'Je ne me poserai plus de questions' (I,11), is followed by a string of questions; and, although the resolution recurs, protest at its ineffectiveness is confined to the mild 'Décidément il semble impossible, à ce stade, que je me passe de questions, comme je me l'étais promis'

(I,49). As other heroes occasionally found before him, he cannot control the creative process: 'on pourrait multiplier les exemples ... mais voilà, on ne peut pas' (I,175).<sup>1</sup> As early as Murphy the tendency of the imagination to create a proliferative world was discernible. In L'innommable, where the fictional world is non-referential, this tendency is more in evidence and far more difficult to overcome, since the images it produces have no substance and are not subjected to the restrictions of a relationship with objective reality. The impersonalised voice leads without difficulty to a hypothetical train of speakers, 'l'un après l'autre' (I,240); a linguistically conventional "vous" produces 'qui vous, ça doit être l'assistance, tiens, il y a une assistance, c'est un spectacle' (I,193); or the imagining of a task to be done -- a receptacle to be emptied and one to be filled -- develops to 'ou il y en aurait quatre, ou cent, dont une moitié à vider, l'autre à remplir' (I,226-7). So one of the basic creative principles of Comment c'est is already at work here -- language, uncontrolled by plot demanding relevance to a story, or by the objective world as a point of reference, is revealed as a self-generating process.

As Malone claimed to speak in order to postpone death, the Unnamable claims to invent 'pour retarder l'heure de parler de moi' (I,34); but the reiterated protests -- 'je suis obligé de parler' (I,8-9), 'il faut que le discours se fasse' (I,13), 'on

<sup>1</sup> The periodic admissions of Malone and his predecessors that their narrative material is not wholly accessible to them, while light-hearted and debunking in intent in the earlier novels, here takes on threatening overtones as the words themselves seem to assume control.



ne peut plus s'arrêter' (I,170) -- scattered throughout the text, tacitly allow that the prose is quite ungovernable. The suggestion that the monologue is motivated by boredom (also proffered by Malone) is directly refuted: 'inutile de se raconter des histoires, pour passer le temps, les histoires ne font pas passer le temps, rien ne le fait passer ... on s'est toujours raconté n'importe quoi ... pour passer le temps, puis, le temps ne passant pas, pour rien, dans la soif, voulant s'arrêter, ne pouvant s'arrêter' (I,200-1). Clearly all justifications for the existence and prolongation of the narrative are mere rationalisation, since the writer actually has no choice; he must write to exist.

## VII. Selection of Narrative Material

The choice of material for inclusion in the novel is here reduced to a question of finding any material at all, the creative consciousness being completely isolated and inward-looking: 'je n'ai pas beaucoup de mots, je n'ai pas beaucoup de choix, je ne choisis pas' (I,233). All images are grasped at like straws to keep the narrative flowing: 'j'attends beaucoup de ces lumières ... pour m'aider à continuer et éventuellement à conclure' (I,14). Since the self, the only subject of significance, cannot be spoken of, the content of the discourse matters little: 'ce qui est encore plus intéressant, que je, ce qui est encore plus intéressant, que je, je ne sais plus, ça ne fait rien' (I,8),

'Qu'est-ce que j'allais dire ? Tant pis, je dirai autre chose, tout ça se vaut' (I,56-7); anything goes once the words keep coming: 'le fil est perdu, tant pis, prenons-en un autre, d'un petit mouvement, d'un détail qui s'affaisse, se soulève, ça ferait chiquenaude, tout l'ensemble s'en ressentirait, ça ferait boule de neige, ce serait bientôt l'agitation généralisée' (I,199) -- and we can see from this how the tendency of images to proliferate is actually exploited to feed the monologue. Hence the importance of simple objects which are easily spoken of -- the rejection of the complexity of the emotional war-hero story, for example, in favour of 'la porte, c'est la porte qui m'intéresse, elle est en bois' (I,246), or Worm's desire for 'une simple chose, une boîte, un bout de bois, qui viendrait se placer devant lui' (I,155).<sup>1</sup> Seen from the point of view of narrative sustenance, the early exclamation: 'quelle doit être l'attitude vis-à-vis les objets ? Tout d'abord, en faut-il ? Quelle question' (I,9), becomes weighted with irony. But truth demands that the contingent nature of all images be made clear: 'Les choses, les figures, les bruits, les lumières, dont ma hâte de parler affuble lâchement cet endroit, il faut de toute façon, en dehors de toute question de procédé, que j'arrive à les en bannir' (I,25). While there is no selective process as such, the desire for truth nonetheless leads to a method of procedure which is fairly faithfully

<sup>1</sup> Cf. The loving descriptions of hats and buttons and bicycles, in preceding novels, or Malone's tender affection for small objects like stones and pieces of wood.

adhered to: 'D'abord salir, ensuite nettoyer' (I,25); this is the conscious application of the policy of retraction introduced by Molloy. If no element of choice is allowed to determine the nature of the images, their evocation at least demands their subsequent annihilation. As Watt discovered, 'the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something (W,74), so that this retractive policy meets the Unnamable's problematical need: 'parler pour ne rien dire' (I,32). As the speaker recognises, 'Peu importe le sujet, il n'y en a pas' (I,150).

#### VIII. The Time Factor

The temporal organisation of L'innommable is concerned with the act and agony of creative writing in total isolation from "life by the clock". The passage of time is only represented by the movement of the reader's eye over the written page; for the narrator time reigns as Macmann's 'instant sans bornes' (MM,109). As he is the creator of the preceding novels, their writing constitutes his past, his individuality,<sup>1</sup> and their contents thus form part of his "here and now", expressed ('par une naturelle association d'idées': I,212) in spatial terms: 'A vrai dire, je les crois tous ici, à partir de Murphy tout au moins' (I,11). For Malone, too, life, existence in time, was equated with writing -- 'C'est ma vie, ce cahier' (MM,191) -- so that

<sup>1</sup> Miriam Allott, Novelists on the Novel (1959), holds that: 'the sense of individuality depends on memory and ... memory in turn depends on time ... what we are depends on what we have been' (p.185) -- an attitude that would partly explain the poor memory of Beckett's heroes, given their weak sense of identity.



the Unnamable's sensation of time as moments which arrive and pile up round him like the written pages of his narrative merely carries Malone's impression to its logical conclusion, horrifying though it be in temporal terms: 'pourquoi le temps ne passe pas, ne vous laisse pas, pourquoi il vient s'entasser autour de vous, instant par instant, de tous les côtés, de plus en plus haut, de plus en plus épais' (I,210); the self drowned in words<sup>1</sup> is 'enseveli sous les secondes' (I,210). Words surge up in the mind in fits and starts, and so the moments arrive, disjointed and incapable of forming a dimensional chronology; language is time for the artist:

ça se passe dans le temps, les secondes passent, les unes après les autres, saccadées, ça ne coule pas, elle ne passent pas, elles arrivent, pan, paf ... vous rentrent dedans, rebondissent, ne bougent plus ... il y en a qui les ajoutent les unes aux autres pour en faire une<sup>2</sup> vie, moi je ne peux pas, chacune est la première (I,222).

In L'innommable the complete separation of language from external

<sup>1</sup> An image undoubtedly related to the heap of sand in which Winnie, in Happy Days, will later be buried, associated, as Professor Coe points out, with the philosopher Zeno's heap of millet referred to in Fin de partie ('les grains s'ajoutent aux grains, un à un, et un jour, soudain, c'est un tas, un petit tas, l'impossible tas':FP,15-6) -- Coe, p.89-90; for the Unnamable, of course, the day of the "impossible tas", can never come.

<sup>2</sup> The depression and nihilism never far from the surface in Beckett's work are apparent in this attitude to time too. Comparison with the poetic expression of a similar sense of the destructive weight of undirected time in the works of Baudelaire, who also suffered from a total loss of hope in life, reveals an exceptionally close similarity in poetic conception. For example:

'Rien n'égale en longueur les boíteuses journées,  
Quand sous les lourds flocons des neigeuses années  
L'ennui, fruit de la morne incuriosité,  
Prend les proportions de l'immortalité.'

(Les Fleurs du mal, Paris 1857: 1961 Edn., LXXVI -- 'Spleen,' p.79)

'Et le Temps m'engloutit minute par minute,  
Comme la neige immense un corps pris de roideur'  
(LXXX -- 'Le gout du néant', p.82).

chronology clearly indicates the artist's sense of total alienation from the outside world.

The "endless instant" which dominates L'innommable is the novel's most powerful unifying factor, since the recording consciousness is anonymous and the speaker's identity diversified. All images of the narrator share the same "here and now" of the novel's world, the same 'présent mythologique' (Mo,37), as Molloy calls it: the basic, nameless image -- 'Les larmes ruissellent le long de mes joues' (I,12) -- discarded pseudo-selves -- 'Malone est là' (I,10) -- Mahood in his jar -- 'La soirée ne fait que commencer, je le sais, ne partons pas encore' (I,110) -- Worm -- 'le voilà maintenant dans un gouffre' (I,146) -- the implied author -- 'c'est dans l'île que je ne cesse de tourner' (I,80) -- the recording consciousness and its disconnected voices -- 'Qui on ? Ne parlez pas tous en même temps' (I,150). In the continuous present of the creative process, temporal distinctions become nothing more than meaningless verbal formalities: 'Il n'y a pas de jours ici, mais je me sers de la formule' (I,10). Past and present are confused, since the past is only accessible insofar as it is part of the present; Mahood's tale accordingly switches arbitrarily from one to the other: 'Hé oui, tantôt c'est le passé, tantôt le présent' (I,83).<sup>1</sup> This lack of chronology is the origin of the lack of direction in the narrative:

<sup>1</sup> In Mercier et Camier such remarks were used to indicate a shift from the time-scale of the story to that of the creative consciousness and back: 'Ils s'assoupissent à nouveau (curieux ce soudain temps présent)' (MC,182), 'Camier s'arrêta (enfin un petit passé)' (MC,186).

'je sens que c'est le moment de jeter un coup d'oeil en arrière, si je peux, et de faire le point, si je veux avancer. Si seulement je savais ce que j'ai dit' (I,98); the only possible valid statement is the unhelpful 'c'est du passé, jusqu'à présent' (I,106). Clock time belongs to the world of social reality, 'là-haut, sous la lumière' (I,238),<sup>1</sup> from which the Unnamable is excluded; only the pseudo-selves act as go-betweens: 'Années, c'est une idée à Basile' (I,43), 'aujourd'hui encore, pour parler encore comme Mahood' (I,45), 'la notion du temps ils me l'ont infligée aussi' (I,77) -- indicating the further degree of alienation experienced by the narrator of the present novel. Felt time, as we already found, is discontinuous, unstructured and unmeasurable: 'Ces temps qui courent, qui galopent, ce sont ceux qui dormaient, les mêmes' (I,134). Any temporal structure introduced is a pure formality to permit the creation of fiction, and unrelated to true experience: 'Je me rappelle le premier bruit entendu dans cet endroit ... Car je dois supposer un commencement à mon séjour ici, ne serait-ce que pour la commodité du récit' (I,16). As the speaker amusingly points out, intelligent usage of words and experience of their meaning do not necessarily coincide: 'si la portée des termes hier et aujourd'hui m'échappe plutôt, cela n'enlève que peu de chose au plaisir que j'ai à assimiler le principal' (I,85). But of course lack

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 'Pourquoi me suis-je fait représenter parmi les hommes, dans la lumière ?' (I,20), and variants (I,80, 158 & 159), making the frequent reappearances of this turn of phrase in Comment c'est instantly comprehensible.



of first-hand experience brings its problems and explains not only the confusion of verbal tenses with past and present intermingled but such indistinctions as 'J'ai dit un instant, c'était peut-être des années' (I,59), or 'Longuement, brièvement, c'est égal' (I,43). The Unnamable is merely using "les mots des autres" which do not relate to his own sense of time:

je ne comprends rien à la durée, je ne peux pas en parler, j'en parle bien, je dis jamais et toujours, je parle des saisons et des parties du jour et de la nuit ... ce sont des mots qu'on m'a appris, sans bien m'en faire voir le sens, c'est comme ça que j'ai appris à raisonner (I,247).

One of the most unnerving innovations in L'innommable is the admission that the occasional temporal gaps which occurred in the earlier novels were in truth disguised breaks in the stream of consciousness of the hidden creator. Now that the level of awareness reveals the creative process in action, these gaps can no longer be rationalised as a means of deflating fictional pretensions or as a loss of consciousness of a fictional narrator, but must be exposed as uncontrollable failures in the flow of words -- 'un petit silence' (I,124), 'tous ces petits silences ... ces trous où tous se penchent à l'affût d'un murmure d'homme' (I,125), 'il y a de longs silences' (I,132 & 170), 'Ces petites pauses' (I,166), 'Je crois que j'ai des absences, qu'il y a des phrases entières qui sautent' (I,167), 'Des trous, il y en a toujours eu, c'est la voix qui s'arrête' (I,168). The disintegrating identity of the speaker leads him to renounce narrative responsibility even for previously created novels, so that

their temporal discontinuities are now explained as impositions of the pseudo-selves on the implied author: 'A vrai dire ils ont toujours affectionné ce procédé, s'arrêtant brusquement, au moindre signe d'acquiescement de ma part, et me laissant en suspens, sans autre source de renouveau que la vie qu'ils m'avaient imputée' (I, 87). Although it is only in L'innommable that the gap between narrator and narration, between recording consciousness and flow of words, becomes evident, consideration of earlier fictions in the light of the Unnamable's revelations obliges us to admit that this "espace intérieur", to use Brian T. Fitch's term, was always present. Mr. Fitch's analysis of the effects of the periodic moments of silence needs no embellishment:

Or, ces trous dans la narration ne nous laissent pourtant pas apercevoir le narrateur, mais seulement le noir de l'espace intérieur. Et ce fait témoigne irréfutablement de l'existence de cet espace. Car à de tels moments, nous sommes le plus près de lui -- seulement, sa présence se fait sentir comme absence.

C'est qu'avec le silence disparaît cette barrière, ce tissu de mensonges et bavardages, qui, tout en nous séparant du narrateur, fournissait paradoxalement à la fois le seul moyen de communication possible et la seule chose communicable.<sup>1</sup>

As the movement of the discourse is equated with time, so breaks in it are synonymous with timelessness, the realm of the essence

<sup>1</sup> 'Narrateur et narration dans la trilogie romanesque de Samuel Beckett', Bulletin des jeunes romanistes, IV (mai 1961), p.18. Mr. Fitch's remarks are mainly related to Malone meurt, but are perhaps more directly applicable to L'innommable where no effort is made to disguise the gaps in the word-stream and incorporate them in the fiction. It is only the Unnamable's probing of the creative process that leads to a reassessment of the interruptions in Malone's monologue.

of self -- 'il est fait de silence ... il est dans le silence ... il n'a pas d'histoire, il n'a pas été dans l'histoire' (I,258-9). If all stories unfold in time, the unspeakable story of the inner core of self lies in the timeless realm of silence evoked by the gaps admitted into the flow of words. The significance for Beckett of these breaks in narration can be devined from remarks of the early hero, Belacqua, in the unpublished 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women': 'The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement ... his experience shall be the menace, the miracle, the memory of an unspeakable trajectory'.<sup>1</sup> Ultimately the narrator's depiction of these uncontrollable breaks serves to bring the time-scale of the creative process to the fore, so that the reader is forced to share the disconcerting sense of halting, non-directional time which obtains in this novel -- of all Beckett's novels, the closest to chaos.

#### IX. The Thematic Factor

Thematic material in L'innommable is exploited as a powerful force to counteract the disintegrative tendencies of narrator and narration. For this writer, the urge to write is the élan vital which the desire for oblivion cannot smother. And writing,

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Harvey, p,342.



like life, needs a subject, which for the solipsist can only be self. The quest theme on which the novel is founded thus becomes the quest of language for a subject, doomed to failure because profound scepticism leads to the logical conclusion that if the self exists it cannot be known.<sup>1</sup> The tension arising from the obsessive need to write opposed to a longing to cease is the mainspring of the novel, determining its antithetical rhythm and inclination towards abstraction. The rhythmic beat of Malone meurt is muted here but still discernible. The structural principle of creation and negation ('D'abord salir, ensuite nettoyer': I,25) is paralleled by the narrative technique of assertion succeeded by contradiction, and thematically supported by the subdued use of opposing motifs of movement and stasis, so apparent in earlier novels, and other antithetical concepts. The rhythm is much more hazy in the last novel of the Trilogy, however, where concern with the nature of life gives way to an examination of the nature of the novel, writing being the only life known to the alienated artist.<sup>2</sup> The conflicting concepts

<sup>1</sup> A. J. Leventhal, 'The Beckett Hero', Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin, traces the metaphysical background of this attitude to the teachings of Gorgias of Lentini, summed up as: 1. Nothing is; 2. If anything is, it cannot be known; 3. If anything is, and cannot be known, it cannot be expressed in speech (p.46) -- the third proposition forming the basis of the Unnamable's hopeless drive to formulate the self.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Kenner, Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians (1964), points out that, where for Flaubert and Joyce the novel acted as a replacement for the world, containing it in its verbal structure, 'Beckett's comedy, if it can deal with everything it touches because it operates solely with the laws of thought, by the same token can really deal with nothing, because thought is not prior to things, and things escape' (p.106). In other words, for Beckett, life must always be alien to the novel; words cannot grasp it and so the Unnamable's novel contains only itself -- a world of words.

which the language evokes are dominated by the insistence on the hollowness of words -- the powerful logos of the Bible has no place here. Themes of meaninglessness, doubt, lack of value, ignorance, impotence, and wilful illusion therefore tend to override all else, showing up the dynamics of the prose as due to formal devices only, the speaker being incapable of meaningful statement.

Since this novel is located in an inner, abstract world, completely cut off from life in the physical world, movement, which for Malone was essential to life, is subordinate and invariably gives way to stasis. Where it appears, it tends to be hypothetical, strictly past, or impertinent. The basic, nameless image of self is immobile: 'une fois pour toutes, je ne bouge plus' (I,10), while the life and mobility of past pseudo-selves is evoked in the image of Malone, whose permitted present movement is but a travesty of life: 'De sa vivacité mortelle il ne reste que peu de traces. Il passe devant moi à des intervalles sans doute réguliers ... Il passe, immobile' (I,10) -- and the apparent contradiction indicates that for him, too, stasis is more relevant. The only genuine self-propulsion is introduced in the fiction of Mahood's past; but it is puppetlike and stylised, with him circling the family round tower outside, while his relatives circle within: 'A mesure que moi je tournais à l'extérieur, eux ils tournaient à l'intérieur' (I,62-3); and even in this past life his progress depended on periodic halts (like

most Beckettian heroes before him): 'Les arrêts que j'ai faits ne comptent pas. C'était afin de pouvoir continuer' (I,68). Where his existence becomes sufficiently remote from social reality to permit the speaker's temporary identification with him, he is, not unexpectedly, stationary: 'Mais à l'époque dont je parle c'en est fini de cette vie active, je ne bouge ni ne bougerai jamais plus, à moins que ce ne soit sous l'impulsion d'un tiers' (I,81) -- the proviso admitting the possibility of ending up like Malone, circling the mind of his inventor. Worm's isolation from life is depicted in the same opposition of movement and immobility: 'cela est un bonheur pour lui, qu'il ne puisse pas bouger ... car ce serait signer son arrêt de vie, que de bouger de là où il est' (I,145) -- as in Malone meurt movement is here clearly associated with life in the physical world. The fictional nature of the visual image of an implied author, as opposed to the anonymous creative consciousness, is suggested through the imputation of mechanical movement, similar to Mahood's: 'c'est dans l'file que je ne cesse de tourner.... Quand j'arrive au rivage, je m'en retourne, vers l'intérieur' (I,80-1). The activity of daily life reflected in recurring variations of "aller et venir", so frequent in Malone meurt, is here relegated to the inaccessible outer world: 'là-haut rien qu'à une vingtaine de brasses les hommes vont et viennent, on y songe' (I,217), 'c'est Mahood qui m'a tout montré, ici, ... et comment parler, et quoi dire ... et le dehors des hommes ... et leur façon de



vivre, dans des chambres ... ou en allant et venant' (I,244).

If movement is still related to the concept of physical life, stasis is no longer associated with death, as it was in Malone meurt, since it is evoked in a timeless world. Movement here appears as hypothetical, apparent only or belonging to an inaccessible, external world; but immobility is posited as the only possible reality of the inner world in which the novel is framed, being the only concept compatible with unchanging timelessness, with nothingness. But ultimately the contrasting motifs must be accepted as simple devices unrelated to objective truth, just like all other evocations of language, as nothing is really known to the recording consciousness: 'Mettons donc que je sois fixe quoique cela n'ait pas d'importance, que je sois fixe ou que roulant je change sans cesse de place ... ou que tantôt je roule, tantôt m'arrête, puisque je ne sens rien, ni quiétude ni changement' (I,39). The only true movement is in the unending flow of words, of succeeding topics for conversation: 'Un autre est en route, tout va bien. J'en ai encore pour mille ans peut-être' (I,134). In this context stillness becomes silence and repose, ever longed for but inconceivable: 'Non, entre moi et le droit au silence, le repos vivant, s'étend la même leçon que toujours' (I,38). The 'long coma délicieux' (I,77) can only follow on the impossible moment when the self is put into words. Malone's ambition to be conscious of the moment of death, 'de vivre, et faire vivre ... et de mourir vif'

(MM,63), here becomes 'entrer encore vivant dans le silence, pour pouvoir m'en jouir, non, je ne sais pas pourquoi, pour me sentir qui me taisais' (I,225).<sup>1</sup> Thus, from the point of view of the narration, movement is its condition, and stasis is its hopeless aspiration.

The rhythm of contrasting motifs in L'innommable is no longer related to the narrator's physical existence as it was in the first two novels of the Trilogy; images of the visible world are too insubstantial to play such a dominant role. It does, however, relate to the stream of the creative consciousness in that both prose and consciousness maintain themselves in existence through the manipulation of antitheses. Self-cancelling oppositions are used to give shape to the void of Being, and to introduce a structure into time. The result is a pendulum movement -- another form of movement standing still -- which recurs throughout the book: the flickering lights perceived by the nameless, basic image are 'tantôt fort, tantôt faible' (I,13), while the image of Malone 'paraît et disparaît avec une exactitude de mécanique' (I,13); Mahood's eyes: 'je les ferme et rouvre, ferme et rouvre, comme par le passé' (I,90), just like those of the nameless image of self: 'mes yeux, ce ne sont pas les miens ... ils s'ouvrent et se ferment par la force d'habitude ... comme ceux du hibou dans la grotte grillagée de Battersea Park'

<sup>1</sup> Ross Chambers, 'Beckett's Brinkmanship', Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin, sees this as the achievement of self-possession in timelessness, just as Professor Coe interprets Malone's goal, but even here there is the suggestion that the moment of self-possession will coincide with the annihilation of consciousness.

(I,217);<sup>1</sup> like Sapo, 'passant de l'ombre à la clarté' (MM,58), pseudo-selves created to give the narrative substance will be 'lancés à travers l'immuable alternative de l'ombre imparfaite et de la clarté douteuse' (I,41); and Malone's sense of self which alternates between the hard and the liquid is evoked in the repeated comment on the solidification and dissolution of images in the present work: 'curieux ce mélange de dur et de liquide' (I,214 & 216). It is the creative process, then, that depends on the oscillating movement between contrasting motifs in this novel, rather than any depiction of physical existence, a shift of function from that of the earlier novels in keeping with the extreme abstraction of the Unnamable's world. Here antithetical motifs are used as formal devices to keep the prose flowing, with no representational intent; as Beckett says of their use by Joyce, they are 'a series of stimulants to enable the kitten to catch its tail'.<sup>2</sup>

Just as movement and change are only apparent, not real, in this novel, the underlying condition being that of immutability, so the rhythm of contrasting motifs pertains only to the concrete imagery, the surface of the work, where its kernel is an

<sup>1</sup> These owls appear as far back as Murphy -- 'He thought of the four caged owls in Battersea Park, whose joys and sorrows did not begin till dusk' (M,74) -- and when we relate the image to Molloy's preference for night time as the best time to move in his world, and Schopenhauer (quoted by Beckett in Proust) indicating night as the best time for exploration of the inner reality, we reach the suggestion that the mechanically opening and closing eye represents for Beckett vision best suited to introspection.

<sup>2</sup> 'Dante... Brune. Vico.. Joyce' p.22.



unknowable void. This core of nothingness is evoked in themes of ultimate sameness, absence and silence; it is the white which denotes the combination of all colours or the lack of colour,<sup>1</sup> suggested by the space between words, the "mesure pour rien" at the origin of the title of Beckett's next prose work, Textes pour rien, the 'mots blancs' (I,248) with which the Unnamable constructs his discourse. Ignorance, impotence and isolation are the dominant characteristics of the narrator, and the motifs which indicate them help to relate the narrative to a single consciousness; but silence is their natural product, and silence, for the recording consciousness (identified with a continuous stream of words by the compulsive writer), is impossible. Doubt therefore becomes a technique for providing admissible material for the monologue, since it systematically undermines the assertive tendencies inherent in language. And the language itself is rendered compatible with the void which is its subject through motifs of illusion, and lack of meaning and value. The conflict between the urge to write and the ineffable nature of the only possible subject is thus resolved in the motifs employed to develop the themes of language-failure and elusiveness of self: 'je parlerai de moi quand je ne parlerai plus' (I,216).

Total ignorance is claimed as a permanent condition by the speaker: 'A aucun moment je ne sais de quoi je parle, ni de qui,

<sup>1</sup> Cf. 'White ... has always affected me strongly, all white things, sheets, walls and so on, even flowers, and then just white, the thought of white, without more' (From an Abandoned Work, p.12).

ni de quand, ni d'où, ni avec quoi, ni pourquoi' (I,105). Like Worm (the image of self least repugnant to his sceptic's vision), 'ce qu'il ignore, c'est qu'il y ait quelque chose à savoir' (I,121) -- the natural result of his total isolation from the external world. The self or subject is 'lui qui ne sait rien, ne veut rien, ne peut rien, si en ne rien voulant on peut ne rien pouvoir, qui ne peut ni parler ni entendre, qui est moi, qui ne peut être moi, dont je ne peux parler, dont je dois parler' (I,241). If Molloy was no longer sure of the existence of an integral self, the Unnamable's sense of self is completely dissipated so that he is incapable of claiming control over words and acts with which he nonetheless instinctively recognises himself to be connected: 'crevant de solitude et d'oubli, au point que je venais à douter de mon existence, et encore, aujourd'hui, je n'y crois pas une seconde, de sorte que je dois dire, quand je parle, Qui parle, et chercher, et quand je cherche, Qui cherche' (I,213). His basic problem is that: 'J'ai à parler, n'ayant rien à dire, rien que les paroles des autres. Ne sachant pas parler, ne voulant pas parler, j'ai à parler' (I,55). The words which flow from his mouth thus become impersonalised.

The sceptic's vision denies language the power to refer to anything outside itself, so that the rhythmic opposition of motifs on which its progress is so dependent must be accepted as illusory, fading away on close examination, since all words are at heart the same, meaningless: 'les mots se bousculent,

comme des fourmis, pressés, indifférents, n'apportant rien, n'emportant rien, trop faibles pour creuser' (I,139), 'Si seulement je savais ce que j'ai dit. Bah, je suis tranquille, ça n'a pu être qu'une seule chose, la même que toujours' (I,98).<sup>1</sup>

Reference to the world evoked by language is frequently coupled with the notion of illusion, hallucination, falsehood or dream: 'désordre de lumières peut-être une illusion' (I,16), 'Avoir toujours devant les yeux ... le même arrangement d'hallucinations' (I,92-3), 'Worm qui attend son amour, et ces marguerites, on dirait qu'il est mort.... Heureusement que ce n'est qu'un rêve' (I,155), 'tout ça c'est des hypothèses, c'est des mensonges' (I,254). All the structures on which the novel's existence relies are based on wilful illusion: 's'ils pouvaient ... simplement continuer ... sans l'illusion d'avoir commencé un jour, de pouvoir un jour conclure, mais c'est trop difficile...dépourvu de but, de ne pas se vouloir une fin, de raison d'être, un temps où l'on n'était pas' (I,200). Fiction has no relation to objective truth, so that selection of material must be arbitrary, all statement being valueless: 'Au point de vue de l'utilité, c'est la première de ces hypothèses de loin la meilleure.... Mais elles sont déplaisantes toutes les deux. Je dirai donc que nos commencements

<sup>1</sup> The theme of the identification of opposites is here drawn on to deflate verbal pretensions: 'Longuement, brièvement, c'est égal' (I,43), 'c'est peut-être le firmament, c'est peut-être l'abîme, ce sont des mots' (I,251), just as does the notion that all stories are mere repetition of the same story, when considered in this context.



coincident' (I,18). Language cannot do what is here required of it, it cannot formulate the self; and the result is that all speech is pointless: 'ma bouche usée en vain de vaines fictions' (I,42-3); all other formulations are unintended and merely indicative of the speaker's loss of control over the narration: 'si ça prend un sens je n'y peux rien' (I,232). Because of the lack of substance behind the images, they proliferate with ease; and, although they relate to no external reality, being made of words they are the only reality accessible to the narrator: 'j'ai la mer à boire, il y a donc une mer' (I,55).

The non-referential nature of Beckettian speech gives it an importance all of its own. The reader's attention is directed towards the language itself, and does not pass beyond, so that the words take on substance in their own right. The content of the novel may in this sense fairly be seen as words only, and not an evocation of the world beyond it; hence the leitmotifs: 'c'est .. une question de voix' (I, 77, 98-9 & 123), varying to 'une affaire de paroles' (I,98), 'tout est une question de voix' (I,119), 'ce sont des mots' (I,261), leading to 'c'est la présentation qui compte' (I,178), or 'Me voilà fixé ... sur mes origines, en tant que sujet de conversation s'entend, il n'y a que ça qui compte' (I,133). Grammar is as much a material tool here as any stick was for Malone: 'Pour tirer cette question au clair j'aurais besoin d'un bâton ainsi que des moyens de m'en servir ... J'aurais besoin aussi ... de participes futurs et conditionnels'

(I,26-7).<sup>1</sup> From another point of view, the concrete value of the language may easily be seen as blotting out the visible world (true perception of which is, in any event, held by the sceptic -- and present-day scientists<sup>2</sup> -- to be impossible): 'je suis une grande boule parlante, parlant de choses qui n'existent pas ou qui existent peut-être, impossible de le savoir, la question n'est pas là' (I,37) -- to which one might add: 'c'est une question de mots, de voix, il ne faut pas l'oublier' (I,199). Even the images can get lost beneath the words which exist independently: 'ces images sans nom que j'ai, ces noms sans images' (I,247) -- a separation already experienced by Watt and Molloy.

Considering the independent power of words in L'innommable, the speaker's fear of language -- language directed towards self-definition -- is quite understandable: 'j'ai peur, peur de ce que mes mots vont faire de moi' (I,31), as is his problem: 'vais-je pouvoir parler de moi, de cet endroit, sans nous supprimer?' (I,32). And in fact the self and its containing world do give way under the weight of words: 'je suis en mots, je suis fait de mots, des mots des autres ... tout l'univers est ici, avec moi,

<sup>1</sup> Professor Coe's suggestion that the stick, for Malone, represents consciousness (Coe, p.66) is here reinforced.

<sup>2</sup> Niels Bohr, Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge, Essays 1958-62 (1963), speaks of 'the recognition that the interaction between the objects under investigation and our tools of observation ... forms, in the domain of quantum physics, an inseparable part of the phenomena' (pp.18-19). See Olga Bernal, Langage et fiction dans le roman de Beckett, pp.85-88, for a discussion of the resulting problems for the artist.

je suis l'air, les murs, l'emmuré, tout cède' (I,204).<sup>1</sup> The image which then follows exemplifies the power of language to obliterate:

j'écoute ... j'entends, et ... je cherche, comme une bête née en cage de bêtes nées en cage de bêtes nées en cage de bêtes nées en cage ... de bêtes nées et mortes en cage nées et mortes en cage de bêtes nées en cage mortes en cage nées et mortes nées et mortes en cage ... une<sup>2</sup> telle bête, n'ayant plus de son espèce que la peur (I,204-5).<sup>2</sup>

The caged beast haunted by the sense of lack, where that which is absent is outside his experience, is the perfect image for the search for and loss of self.<sup>3</sup> The simile forces the reader to experience abandonment to the autonomous power of language; the piling up of words separates the signs from their original meaning, just as the piling up of time separates the caged beast from his. Words seeking the origin of the beast, like those seeking the self, become self-generating ('comme une bête dis-je, disent-ils' :I,205), and take on weight and substance, blotting out the concepts they are generally intended to represent. The self, when taken over by language, becomes the property of the Other, since language is an external force; 'Je dis ce qu'on me dit de dire, dans l'espoir qu'un jour on se lassera de me parler' (I,119). Thus, in L'innommable, language not only fails the narrator in that it is incapable of performing the function required of it, of designating something other than itself, but

<sup>1</sup> This sensation throws new light on Molloy's moments when 'une cloison s'abattait et je me remplissais de racines et de tiges ... du campos de la nuit et de l'attente du soleil, et puis du grincement de la planète' (Mo,73).

<sup>2</sup> The constant repetition of the words "nées" and "mortes" cannot fail to suggest "né-mort".

<sup>3</sup> With typical concision, the speaker of Comment c'est will render the same lack as 'cherchant ce que j'ai perdu là où je n'ai jamais été' (CC,57).



it usurps the creative consciousness' controlling function, so that the novel is constantly menaced with a collapse into confusion.

#### X. Repetition

The dominant purpose served by repetition in L'innommable is the calling to mind of earlier Beckettian works, backed up by open reference to their content, in order to relate them to the present recording consciousness. Phrases and images reappear in the Unnamable's discourse, taken from all over the place, showing that Beckett's previous fiction has been absorbed into the present of the current fictional creator, just as Malone appears in his environment. Even an early critical essay is not out of place, since it too is part of the linguistic past of the present word-assembler: cf. 'the tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin ... the sin of having been born' (Pr,67), and 'On m'a donné un pensum, à ma naissance peut-être, pour me punir d'être né' (I,46-7). Watt's finding that 'the pot proved as little a shield, or a raven, or any other of the things that Watt called it, as a pot' (W,80) is echoed in the Unnamable's exclamation: 'ces fenêtres que je ferais peut-être mieux d'appeler portes, enfin autrement, et ce mot homme qui n'est peut-être pas le bon pour ce que je vois en l'entendant' (I,247-8). Molloy's constipated dog, 'Le petit chien ... faisait de longues girations.... La constipation chez les poméraniens

est signe de bonne santé' (Mo,14-5), recurs in the imagery describing Mahood's frantic convolutions, 'de plus en plus crispé, comme un chien constipé' (I,69). Moran's 'Mais les chemins changent d'aspect, refaits en sens inverse' (Mo,256) is recalled in 'le chemin le plus terne a une tout autre allure, un tout autre terne, au retour qu'à l'aller' (I,60). The disembodied hand which feeds Malone (MM,18) is revived in the Unnamable's image of 'la main amie ... attendre seul ... qu'une main vienne, vous tirer de là' (I,194), and the former's speculations concerning his whereabouts -- 'je ne gagne rien à me supposer au sous-sol s'il y en a plusieurs' (MM,82) -- furnish the most plausible explanation for the otherwise incomprehensible interpolation in the imagined small-talk of Mahood's family: 'Où est-ce que je vais le mettre ? Au sous-sol ? Ne serais-je après tout qu'au sous-sol ? Qu'est-ce qu'il a à s'arrêter tout le temps ?' (I,63). Vladimir's ditty, 'Un chien vint dans l'office' (G,96-7), is used to exemplify the Unnamable's proliferative 'rêve sans fin' (I,187). Even phrases from future fictions are already part of this narrator's linguistic world: Clov's 'il faut que tu arrives à souffrir mieux que ça, si tu veux qu'on se lasse de te punir' (FP,108) is twice anticipated here: 'je souffre mal aussi' (I,55), 'je ne souffre pas encore assez ... pour pouvoir bouger' (I,256); and phrases which will be developed almost into a refrain in Comment c'est are already ubiquitous in this closing work of the Trilogy -- variants of

"là-haut dans la lumière", "un bon moment", "ce sont de bons moments", not to mention the title "comment c'est" itself.

Where in Malone meurt such inter-novel repetition suggested that the novel was merely a reformulation of previous ones, here it serves to unite all the fictions, including those incorporated in the Unnamable's monologue, in the context of the consciousness in which they originate. Thus, by contrast with its role in earlier works, where it emphasised the fictional nature of the material, here it has an authenticating function, bringing the reader into direct contact with the experience of the creative artist.

The use of leitmotifs throughout the novel both helps to set the tone of the prose and emphasises the linear structure by weaving recognisable threads into its texture, highlighting the forward movement of the narrative. Many of these leitmotifs were incorporated in other Beckettian works too, so that they also support the main function of repetition as a pointer to the overall creative consciousness. A blend of ignorance and uncertainty strikes the dominant chord of the monologue, sounded in the recurring phrases: "je ne comprends pas", "je ne crois pas", "paraît-il", "peut-être", "sait-on jamais", "je ne sais pas", "rien n'est moins sûr", "ce n'est pas sûr", "à moins que", "ce n'est pas vrai", "la question n'est pas là", "ce n'est pas le mot". The different levels of reality are related by these linking phrases and images: 'je me comprends' (I,61 & 100) unites



the speech of Mahood with that of the anonymous recording consciousness; the underground setting of the novel, or at least exclusion from the world "là-haut", is coupled with the desire for enclosure, countering the theme of disintegration, in the womb-like images associated with all attempted formulations of self -- 'oubliettes', 'cage thoracique', 'un endroit. Sans accès, sans issue, endroit sûr', 'cachot, 'si je pouvais me mettre dans une chambre ... ce serait une mine', 'Enorme prison', 'une cellule suffirait', 'ma cachette'.<sup>1</sup> Overall, when one considers the extent of the role played by thematic material in L'innommable, both from the point of view of narrative cohesion and, given the limitation of substance, variation, the musical quality of Beckett's prose becomes apparent. Themes and the motifs which bear them are exploited here, not just as ideas, but as non-representational structural elements which give form to this highly abstract novel.

#### XI. Narrative Viewpoint and Responsibility

From the very early lines of L'innommable, 'Qui maintenant ? ... Dire je. Sans le penser' (I,7), it is clear that the problem of narrative viewpoint in this novel is bound to be highly complex. Since in a sense the book is an account of the creative process, it is to be expected that the problem prove as pertinent for the narrator as it is for the reader -- which turns out to be the

<sup>1</sup> See I,78, 93, 126, 167, 230, 250, 251, & 255.

case. As Olga Bernal says, the last novel of the Trilogy is 'l'Histoire du Je'.<sup>1</sup> According as the speaker feels word-control slipping away from him, and language taking on a power of its own, the vantage point which the "I" is expected to pinpoint becomes increasingly difficult to locate -- hence the successive trials of other pronouns to see if they relate better to the predicate, and the feeling that 'il n'y a pas de nom pour moi, pas de pronom pour moi' (I,240). The predominantly first-person narration, however, offers the reader no protection from the tendency to identify with the speaker (unlike the earlier novels, this one provides the "I" with no physical attributes which the reader can reject), and since the narrator's sense of identity has deteriorated to the point of being non-existent, the reader's instinctive association with him becomes extremely painful. He too undergoes the experience of loss of self, of disintegration in language.

Narrative responsibility is utterly disclaimed by the reigning consciousness; the narrator is, as it were, the voice box, but not the voice. He first designates his fictional creations as origins for the monologue: 'j'étais tout entier, je cite Mahood, à mon affaire' (I,66), 'Maintenant je m'entends dire que c'est la voix de Worm qui commence, je transmets la nouvelle' (I,119-20), only assuming the role of intermediary. Then

<sup>1</sup> Langage et fiction dans le roman de Beckett, p.56.

the monologue is related to some intangible, external forces, or force -- 'Worm étant au singulier ... eux sont au pluriel, pour éviter qu'il y ait confusion' (I,150-1) -- created to fill the void: 'Heureusement qu'ils sont là ... pour porter la responsabilité de cet état de choses ... ces fantômes parlants' (I,179). And the force reverts to the singular as soon as danger of confusion is past, becoming a mysterious "quelqu'un" -- 'quelqu'un dit je, sans le penser' (I,236), echoing the opening 'Dire je. Sans le penser' (I,7) -- who interposes himself between the flow of words and both the present "I" and the present recollections of earlier Beckettian heroes: 'Mercier n'a jamais parlé, Moran n'a jamais parlé, moi je n'ai jamais parlé, j'ai l'air de parler, c'est parce qu'il dit je comme si c'était moi' (I,239). But being ultimately unidentifiable, the number of the externalised subject remains insecure: 'et encore, ce n'est peut-être pas lui, c'est peut-être toute une bande ... que cela est confus, quelqu'un parle de confusion' (I,239-40). No responsible subject can be found and the disembodied voice is left frantically seeking: 'c'est moi qu'elle accuse, il faut accuser quelqu'un ... il faut un coupable ... elle se dit à moi ... il faut une victime, je n'ai qu'à écouter, elle indiquera ma cachette' (I,255); but even this slight hope is swiftly dismissed: 'tout ça c'est des mensonges, ce n'est pas moi qu'on appelle, ce n'est pas de moi qu'on parle' (I,256).

Nor is the implied author allowed to assume narrative responsibility; in this novel he is indistinguishable from the



self-seeking consciousness that records the narrative, and claims to have recorded the earlier Beckettian fiction: 'Ces Murphy, Molloy et autres Malone, je n'en suis pas dupe. Ils m'ont fait perdre mon temps, rater ma peine, en me permettant de parler d'eux, quand il fallait parler seulement de moi, afin de pouvoir me taire' (I,32-3). No longer, then, does the implied author transcend the first-person narrator, as in the other novels of the Trilogy; he is permitted the same claims to reality, no more and no less, as other formulations of self contained in the work. The speaker -- 'quelqu'un, si j'ose m'appeler ainsi' (I,182) -- easily assumes the public form of the author: 'Ça c'est le fort en thème, c'est lui qu'on appelle toujours à la rescousse quand les choses tournent mal' (I,182-3), 'le matheux est là' (I,189). It is the Irishman whose roots are in Ireland -- 'c'est dans l'île que je ne cesse de tourner' (I,80) -- and whose French is suspect -- 'Non pas qu'il présente le moindre intérêt, tiens, il doit y avoir erreur, non pas qu'il soit particulièrement intéressant' (I,181). The author confuses his characters: 'Worm, ou, comme je suis tenté de l'appeler, Watt' (I,106). The Parisian poet confides: 'lorsqu'on dit un poème qu'on aime, lorsqu'on aime la poésie, dans le métro, ou dans son lit, pour soi, les mots sont là' (I,195). But all the voices merge, and none is more authentic than the others; none dominates. The implied author here is as much a fictional persona as Worm or Mahood, or as earlier heroes in the novels. The vantage point from

which the fictional world is viewed refuses to be identified.

### XII. Conclusion

Since there is no clash between narrator and implied author in L'innommable, revelations of the fictional nature of the narrative do not detract from the authenticity of the experience depicted, which is that of the creative act itself. Irony is therefore not so fundamental here as in preceding works, being related to the created fiction and not to the act of creation on which attention is now concentrated. The existence of the words on paper is never in doubt; and that is the only claim made by the novelist. The book's reality is self-contained, it is a verbal structure and no other reality is brought to the reader's mind with sufficient substantiality to drown that of the actual words. Beyond the words themselves is nothing but illusion, inevitable but recognised as such: 'Ne pas avoir été dupe, c'est ce que j'aurai eu de meilleur, fait de meilleur, avoir été dupe, en voulant ne pas l'être, en croyant ne pas l'être, en sachant l'être, en n'étant pas dupe de ne pas être dupe' (I,55). And the insecure and bewildered reader can only share the Unnamable's admission of helplessness before the representative force of language. The success of the novel lies in the fact that the reader is not the dupe of the images, but reaches beneath them to sense the ineffable void which for Beckett is the true subject, the true self:

cette rue de désastre ... Je pourrais la décrire, je l'aurais pu, il y a un instant, comme si j'y avais été ... la tête assez obéissante, pour me donner tout au moins une vague idée de ce qu'il aurait fallu soustraire à ce décor pour que ce soit le vide et le silence (I,96).

L'innommable's claims to be a novel must be based on its claims to depict the writer's experience of the creative process and, insofar as this is the writer's experience of life, to portray the mode of being of the writer as artist. This is the twentieth-century artist, inward-looking and alienated from social reality. He lives in his writing, but has lost the nineteenth-century artist's confidence that language brings him to deeper knowledge of the reality of the world: 'Mais est-ce une vie, ça, qui se dissipe dès qu'on passe à un autre sujet?' (I,136). The world in which he lives is disconnected from physical existence. All he has is an instinctive sense of self which the logic of language fails to support. Language, the tool of his art, is provided with no other material to work on than self, which having no substance proves unworkable. The novel is thus the record of a defeat; the creative process which it dramatises can only be a succession of failures since language, which is the creative implement, has greater substance than that which it is called on to portray -- the little world of self, 'l'impensable indicible, où je n'ai cessé d'être' (I,98), the nothingness which can only be spoken of as something, but which is therefore incompatible with speech. It is to be ten years before Beckett produces another major prose work, Comment c'est; after the



appalling experience of L'innommable, in which the self disintegrated under the penetrating logic and weight of words, the introduction of the physical presence of man in the artistic product seems an obvious solution; and so the best part of Beckett's work in the intervening years is for the theatre. Comment c'est, now that language is deprived of all possible referential power, both regarding the external world and the inner self, can only be a veritable creation ex nihilo, formulated for no other end than to meet the artist's need to create.

CHAPTER VII

C O M M E N T      C ' E S T

## I. Introduction

During the ten years following the completion of L'innommable Beckett produced two less substantial prose fiction works and a solid contribution to his writings for theatre and radio. The prose fiction he regarded as unsuccessful: the Textes pour rien were written immediately after the Trilogy, in 1950, and Beckett said of them to Israel Shenker that they were 'an attempt to get out of the attitude of disintegration, but it failed';<sup>1</sup> fragile and private, the thirteen Textes are even more abstract than L'innommable, tattered utterances of the shadow of self, 'mémoire et rêve de moi' (NTPR, 212); recognition of the failure of the English prose work is implicit in its title, From an Abandoned Work, which reverts to the tone and relative solidity of Molloy; harsh, fluent and comic, it perhaps was felt to be an over-reaction to the tentative, flimsy structures of the Textes; its images may have seemed too substantial and its narrator could no longer

<sup>1</sup> 'Moody Man of Letters', p.3. This failure, as Michael Robinson points out, 'refers to the inability to progress beyond the position of The Unnamable, not to the actual quality of the Texts as writing' (The Long Sonata of the Dead, p.313).



claim with the voice of the Textes: 'Mais je ne suis pas dupe ... je ne suis pas là, et qui plus est je ne suis pas ailleurs' (NTPR, 205). Comment c'est is the next and most recent full-length novel -- if one is prepared to extend the definition of the novel to cover this strange work, whose language and structure belong to the hazy No man's land which divides the realms of prose and poetry. The paucity of the images in Textes pour rien is replaced by a phantasmagoria of mental images and 'petites scènes juste le temps de voir' (CC, 105), which yet never assume the solidity of the visible world projected in the remnant From an Abandoned Work. The speaker here is never the "dupe" of language; he does not demand belief in a reality beyond the words themselves; but he is resigned, in a way the Unnamable never was, to the necessity of images for life, or for the sustenance of the narrating voice with which he equates it: 'Cette voix autant dire cette vie' (CC, 173).

To admit Comment c'est to the family of the novel, one needs to accept an open-ended definition, like that of E. M. W. Tillyard, for whom the novel is 'a vague term denoting at most a prose medium, some pretence of action, a minimum length, and a minimum of organisation'<sup>1</sup> -- the emphasis for Beckett lying on the word "pretence", whose ambiguity is singularly apt. Particularities of identity, time and space are no longer the centre of questioning attention as they were in L'innommable; here they

<sup>1</sup> The Epic Strain in the English Novel (1958) p.24.

are arbitrarily furnished in their capacity as temporary structural props laying no claim to be attempts to reach the truth, readily supplied and as readily denied. While the incapacity of Beckett's vision contrasts sharply with the masterly, discerning vision of a Joyce, yet he shares his forerunner's concentration on life as the subject of the novel; as much as Joyce's Ulysses, Comment c'est still meets Virginia Woolf's exhortation: 'Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall',<sup>1</sup> although Beckett's idiom and material are so very different: 'instants passés vieux songes qui reviennent ou frais comme ceux qui passent ou chose chose toujours et souvenirs je les dis comme je les entends ... ma vie dernier état mal dite mal entendue mal retrouvée mal murmurée' (CC,9). The central situation here could not be more simple or essential -- a man struggles for breath to keep alive, and between the breaths listens to the voice of his consciousness, ascribing to himself a life. Even though he knows that the facts of which he creates his life are unverifiable, since he exists in isolation from external reality, the speaker of necessity submits to the need to furnish them, facts being the substance of formulated consciousness. Living for the artist isolated from external reality can only be fiction, and so Comment c'est, an avowed fabrication, can fairly claim to express the artist's sense of life.

<sup>1</sup> The Common Reader (1925), p.190.

## II. Fictional World

Although, as in L'innommable, the framework of the present novel is the little world of the mind, the abstraction of the former is abandoned as impracticable and the most recent creator quietly admits the necessity of giving his world a concrete form. The chasm between the world of self, 'la vie ici' (CC,118), and that of social reality, 'la vie l'autre dans la lumière' (CC,10), always apparent in Beckett's work and already expressed in similar terms towards the end of L'innommable, is substantiated in Comment c'est to become the opposition of life above and life underground 'dans le noir la boue' (CC,25).<sup>1</sup> Malone too alternated between the physical and mental realms, but here the basic situation is completely reversed in that physical references relate to the underground or inner world while images of social reality are set firmly within the speaker's mind, as were Malone's fictions. It is, however, the inner world of darkness and mud which provides Comment c'est's framework, the outer world is excluded as it was in L'innommable: 'la vie l'autre dans la lumière ... pas question d'y remonter' (CC,10), and reference to it is confined to 'quelques images par instants dans la boue' (CC,10). Life as lived by the Aristotelian social animal is beyond the speaker's direct cognisance and is treated in thematic

<sup>1</sup> Professor Coe points out that this distinction is already clear in the Textes, combined with the Kafkaesque courtroom image of the scribe, 'clarifying the various stages of the disintegration of the human personality' (Coe, pp.79-80). Comment c'est's setting may also be seen as the literal interpretation of Dostoevsky's image of "underground man" (in Notes from Underground) which Professor F. J. Hoffman suggests may have influenced Beckett's thought -- Samuel Beckett, The Language of Self (Illinois 1962), pp.48-55.



terms already familiar to us from the earlier novels as intuited through dream, fantasy and illusion, brief pictures in the mind; memories, fictions, wishes fulfilled in fancy -- all images of life in the light are set on the same level of reality.

The harsh setting of Comment c'est is presented from two antithetical points of view: as permanent within the confines of the novel itself, and as temporary within the context of Beckett's oeuvre. As can be seen from the reappearance of descriptive elements introduced near the close of L'innommable,<sup>1</sup> the world of the most recent novel represents yet another fictional materialisation of the abstract framework of the creative consciousness in which the totality of Beckettian fiction has its origin, and which the last novel of the Trilogy intimated in its succession of rejected concrete settings. The mud and darkness of Comment c'est can thus be attributed only temporary validity, being acceptable just so long as the speaker is concerned with the present version of life, but meriting no more credibility than earlier accounts; hence the leitmotifs "présente rédaction" and "cette fois", associated with descriptions of life, or the introduction of a possible alternative structure being seen as 'cette nouvelle formulation autant dire cette nouvelle vie' (CC,171). On the other hand, where the

<sup>1</sup> Darkness and mud: 'on ne voit rien ... on entend le long baiser de l'eau morte et de la boue' (I,216-7); panting and murmured snatches of speech: 'le souffle manque c'est presque la fin, le souffle s'arrête' (I,221), 'la voix me dira tout ... par petites bribes, en haletant' (I,255).

Unnamable consistently resisted the evocative powers of language, so that his world was protean and each form assumed was rejected as a falsification, the speaker in Comment c'est clings determinedly to his single formulation. As the horizons of the novels have been increasingly limited -- Murphy's geographical clarity reducing to the amorphism of mud in the latest novel -- so has the creator's ambition to give his world a definitive formulation. The Unnamable at least went to the trouble of trying to convey the abstract quality of the realm of consciousness by condemning each hint of substance as a failure, but the present speaker takes it for granted that the truth is unspeakable, and, since he is condemned to speech, accepts that he is condemned to fiction; a single misrepresentation is no more reprehensible than a whole series, once hope of improvement is abandoned. And speech itself has become so difficult here, with 'pertes partout' (CC,9) and 'l'imagination qui décline' (CC,126), that any measure of stability for the monologue is grasped at. Consequently the few basic ingredients of which the protagonist forms his world are forcefully represented -- 'autres certitudes la boue le noir récapitulons le sac les boîtes la boue le noir le silence la solitude' (CC,11) -- and clung to where all else disintegrates. At the close of the novel we find him still insisting: 'difficile à croire aussi oui que j'aie une voix moi oui en moi oui quand ça cesse de haleter oui pas à d'autres moments non et que je murmure moi oui dans le noir oui la boue oui ... mais il faut

le croire oui' (CC,174-5). Even though all other images are brutally denied as 'de la foutaise' (CC,175), and finally the beloved sack must be abandoned, the mud and darkness persist to the end: 'là rien à corriger' (CC,176).

### III. The Speaker

Just as the chaos of abstraction in the containing world of L'innommable is rejected in Comment c'est in favour of a material structure however irrelevant to truth, so the abortive attempts to formulate an empty, anonymous and disintegrated self in words give way to the need for formal clarity. The Unnamable's anger and frustration at the failure of language is now become resignation. This speaker does not even protest against the linguistic convenience of the first person,<sup>1</sup> since doubt is for him an accepted condition of speech: 'moi dire moi pour dire quelque chose' (CC,42); indeed he welcomes the solidity it provides: 'j'entends dire moi encore le murmure dans la boue et suis encore' (CC,153). Names are given for clarity's sake as the need arises, but they are contingent only and change as the need changes: 'il n'avait pas de nom c'est donc moi qui le lui ai donné Pim pour plus de commodité', 'je lui intime que moi aussi Pim' (CC,74), 'Bom qu'il m'appelle Bom pour plus de commodité' (CC,75), 'moi Pim Bom à venir' (CC,97), 'tout ce qui a

<sup>1</sup> Cf. the Unnamable's protest: 'Dire je. Sans le penser' (I,7).



été dit ... sauf que moi Pim Bem moi' (CC,133), 'illumination ici Bem est donc Bom' (CC,137).<sup>1</sup> The suggestion that all the novel's creatures are formal representations of aspects of a disintegrated self is inherent in their tendency to multiply and then be resubmerged in a single name, so that the naming process is easily subjected to ridicule: 'Bom à l'abandonné pas moi Bom toi Bom nous Bom mais moi Bom toi Pim moi à l'abandonné pas moi Pim toi Pim nous Pim mais moi Bom toi Pim quelque chose là qui ne va pas du tout' (CC,139) -- here the names are the source of that very confusion they seek to avoid. Hence, at heart, the names matter little: 'on était venu Bem Pem une syllabe un m à la fin le reste égal' (CC,133),<sup>2</sup> 'ou [la voix] disait en réalité tantôt Bem tantôt Bom par distraction ou inadvertance en croyant ne pas varier' (CC,138); indeed the naivety of the structuring voice is actually pointed out: 'n'ayant pas compris que Bem et Bom ne pouvaient faire qu'un' (CC,138). In the main, however, the speaker in Comment c'est reverts to the comfort of Watt's 'pillow of old words' (W,115), avoiding the desolation of namelessness which the Unnamable faced with such

<sup>1</sup> Names have always been regarded as accidentals unrelated to selfhood in Beckett's work, from the ironic reaction to Mr. Spiro's self-naming in Watt -- 'Here then was a sensible man at last. He began with the essential' (W,25) -- to Malone's and the Unnamable's arbitrary name-changing in their sub-fictions, and the scorn of the speaker in the Textes: 'avec un nom comme un chien pour qu'on puisse m'appeler et des signes distinctifs pour qu'on puisse me repérer' (NTPR,186).

<sup>2</sup> The indirect reference to the author's name, Sam, has been remarked on by several commentators.

courage: 'Pim je m'appelle Pim ... ça m'a fait un bien ... difficile à préciser moins anonyme en quelque sorte moins obscur' (CC,74).

Despite the multitude of creatures which the book portrays at one time or another, its underlying subject is still the solitary being of earlier novels, whose condition is that of all mankind: 'chacun d'entre nous est en même temps Bom et Pim bourreau victime pion cancre demandeur défenseur muet et théâtre d'une parole retrouvée ... là rien à corriger' (CC,169). Names and separate bodies are merely formal means of dividing off various facets of the chameleon self under scrutiny. The basic split, as ever, is between the self as perceiver and as perceived. Speaking of the art of the Van Velde brothers, Beckett considered the problems of representation for the artist, and his distinctions apply absolutely to the problems of self-representation:

Existe-t-il quelque chose, en dehors du changement, qui se laisse représenter ?

Il leur reste, à l'un la chose qui subit, la chose qui est changée; à l'autre la chose qui inflige, la chose qui fait changer.

Deux choses qui, dans le détachement, l'une du bourreau, l'autre de la victime, où enfin elles deviennent représentables, restent à créer.<sup>1</sup>

And these two aspects of the self, as victim and as torturer, are clearly represented in Comment c'est by Bom and Pim.

The "inner distance" between narrator and narration, between the intuited self and the voice of recording consciousness, which so

<sup>1</sup> 'La peinture des Van Velde', p. 355.

distressed the Unnamable, remains in Comment c'est, although the autonomy of the voice is less certain: 'voix d'abord dehors quaqu de toutes parts puis en moi quand ça cesse de haleter raconte-moi encore finis de me raconter' (CC,9) -- here the equivocal language (and the English version is even more ambiguous: 'tell me again finish telling me':HII,7) slyly admits that self-verbalisation is still the inevitable aim of Beckett's fiction: 'pas de Pim pas de Bom et la voix quaqu la nôtre à tous non plus jamais été une seule voix la mienne jamais d'autre' (CC,106). The anonymity of the voice and its unalterable ambition is reasserted at the close of the novel, reminding us of the superficiality of the overlying structure: 'et cette voix anonyme ... la voix de celui qui avant de nous écouter murmurer ce que nous sommes nous l'apprend de son mieux' (CC,168). The self as perceiver from which the voice of consciousness is cut off is further subdivided in Comment c'est (and in the Textes) into 'quelqu'un qui écoute un autre qui note' (CC,10) -- which later produces the Kram/Krim dynasty (CC,161) -- while the addition of 'ou le même' (CC,10) evokes the amorphous mass of self from which the fictional personae are extracted. Where the Unnamable tried to probe beneath the images of consciousness to reach the ineffable self, the speaker here submits to the representative force of language and organises the intimations of self into distinguishable, named entities. Again we are back to the position adopted by Watt, who knew that 'the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something'



(W,74). The underlying state of namelessness is never far from the surface, however; it is the speaker's condition as the novel opens: 'avant Pim remuement sans nom dans la boue c'est moi' (CC,49), and it re-emerges at the novel's close once the structure of names collapses: 'jamais eu de Pim non ni de Bom non jamais eu personne non que moi pas de réponse que moi oui ... et moi je m'appelle comment pas de réponse MOI JE M'APPELLE COMMENT hurlements bon' (CC,175-6).

A further development in the speaker's attitude to self-portrayal in this novel is his ability to turn his back on the insoluble problems raised by sceptical self-scrutiny, thereby avoiding the impasse in which questions trapped the Unnamable: 'avant Pim comment échoué ici pas question on ne sait pas on ne dit pas et le sac d'où le sac et moi si c'est moi pas question impossible pas la force sans importance' (CC,10). The sense of man's insignificance in the face of eternity encourages this side-stepping of problems. This perspective is provided in the image of the chain of creatures stretching round the world or disappearing in the distance: 'la procession qui semblait devoir s'éterniser' (CC,170), and in the 'silences monstres temps énormes' (CC,99) in which his brief speech is set. The collapse of the body which the novels have progressively portrayed is welcomed in Comment c'est in the desire to quench '/dans/ toute cette guenille d'un bout à l'autre des cheveux aux ongles des pieds et des mains le peu de sensation qu'elle garde encore de

ce qu'elle est dans chacune de ses parties' (CC,45) -- and the rich image of the English version, 'all this tenement of naught' (HII,40), recalling the language of the Authorised Version, further emphasises the narrator's scorn for the problems of self, body and mind with which his need for speech confronts him. Here too creeps in the admission that the sense of continuous being which (perhaps falsely) implies selfhood is physical as well as mental, and this brings its own difficulties: 'que de fois à genoux que de fois de dos à genoux sous tous les angles ... si ce n'était pas moi c'était toujours le même piètre consolation' (CC,45) -- and the exclamation suggests that anxiety about the true nature of the self persists despite the poor esteem in which the speaker holds man. Nonetheless the present narrator neatly avoids distressing questions, knowing that, if he admits that the succession of images purporting to be himself are really those of another, his creative impulse will fail, since the main-spring of his fiction is the urge to formulate the self.

It is the lack of conviction with which the images of self are presented in this novel which gives it its frail, will-o-the-wisp quality. L'innommable provided only fleeting images, but there the reigning consciousness was a dominant presence engaged in an active struggle with language; here it is weak and depends for its existence largely on the presence of physical creatures: 'la langue ressort va dans la boue je reste là plus soif ... c'est fait j'ai eu l'image / ça a dû durer un bon moment avec

ça j'ai duré un moment' (CC,38), just as Bom depends on Pim for a notion of life: 'orgie de faux être ... je ne suis pas perdu à l'inexistence' (CC,85). But Pim also needs Bom to bring him to life: 'Pim à tout jamais qu'une carcasse inerte et muette ... sans moi mais comment que je vais l'animer vous allez voir et si je sais m'effacer derrière ma créature quand ça m'arrive' (CC,65), just as the forms on which the narrative depends are generated by the creative consciousness.<sup>1</sup> Even the most durable of the images, the couple Bom and Pim, teeters on the edge of existence: 'comme à chaque instant on cessait et n'était plus là ni pour soi ni pour l'autre des temps énormes' (CC,148). And the self fades into nothingness when the image-bearing voice is silent: 'question si là quand elle s'arrête si là-dedans quelque part' (CC,112). This inter-dependence of image and creative consciousness, in the context of disintegrated selfhood, provides the key to the curious typography, the frequent, apparent non sequiturs, the heterogeneous images and the refrains indicating gaps in consciousness -- "un temps énorme", "des temps énormes". All breaks in textual, temporal and logical continuity suggest the fading away of the reigning consciousness, the petering out of the voice, because of the absence of mental images: 'l'imagination qui décline étant au plus bas' (CC,126).

<sup>1</sup> Lewis Carroll also reveals this schizophrenic sense of dependence on fiction for proof of existence; cf. Through the Looking-glass, and what Alice Found There (1872), pp.221-2 -- 'Now Kitty let us consider who it was that dreamed it all.... You see, Kitty, it must have been either me or the Red King. He was part of my dream, of course -- but then I was part of his dream too!'.



The novel, then, is the history of the self in the last stages of disintegration: 'là donc plus ou moins jadis plus naguère moins très peu tous ces temps derniers ce sont les derniers extrêmement peu presque pas quelques secondes par-ci par-là de quoi marquer une vie' (CC,126); here the speaker, as a creative artist, is undeniably striving towards the immortality of language which Ludovic Janvier claims is Beckett's ultimate goal.<sup>1</sup> However, as always with Beckett, opposing tendencies are equally significant, and if, as artist, the speaker must seek to create a permanent linguistic structure, still, as a human being, his emotional make-up drives him to desire the obliteration of consciousness: 'plus de coeur juste assez pour qu'on en soit content un peu content d'être si peu là de baisser un peu' (CC,126),<sup>2</sup> 'jamais été que moi moi Pim comment c'était avant moi avec moi après moi comment c'est vite' (CC,127) -- a brilliant dramatisation of the artist's vision of nirvana, in which the individual self is obliterated by the anonymous recording consciousness.<sup>3</sup> While the hero of L'Innommable strove to

<sup>1</sup> For Janvier the physical and mental deterioration of the hero facilitate his re-emergence in language: 'Comme d'autres réduisent au silence, Beckett réduit à la parole' (Janvier, p.10).

<sup>2</sup> The freedom of fiction is here used to fulfil Moran's desire: 'Etre vraiment enfin dans l'impossibilité de bouger ... Et avec ça une aphasie complète! Et peut-être une surdité totale! Et qui sait une paralysie de la rétine! Et très probablement la perte de la mémoire! Et juste assez de cerveau resté intact pour pouvoir jubiler!' (Mo,217).

<sup>3</sup> This concept of nirvana must be seen as an escape from the pain of living, however, and not a goal desirable in itself as it was for Murphy -- a change of attitude indicating the progressive pessimism in Beckett's work.

express the ineffable -- 'il faut dire des mots ... jusqu'à ce qu'ils me trouvent' (I,261) -- a superhuman task which he approached with superhuman courage, displaying the greatness of soul which merits the title of "hero" -- 'il faut continuer, je vais continuer' (I,262) -- the will of the speaker of Comment c'est is not involved in artistic creation, he is no longer heroic. He accepts no responsibility for his linguistic structure, language being an absolute from whose outpourings the speaker quotes; 'comment c'était je cite' (CC,9) opens the text, and 'comment c'était fin de la citation après Pim comment c'est' (CC,177) closes it.<sup>1</sup> His whole will is bent towards putting an end to the creative process in which he is trapped but of which he is not master:

alors ça peut changer pas de réponse finir pas de réponse  
je pourrais suffoquer pas de réponse m'engloutir pas de  
réponse ... crever pas de réponse CREVER hurlements JE POUR-  
RAIS CREVER hurlements JE VAIS CREVER hurlements bon (CC,177).

His closing expression of intent, then, is directly opposed to the Unnamable's 'je vais continuer' (I,262). But the declaration is vacuous since the "I" has no control over the voice of consciousness and the autonomous flow of words cannot be stopped. This speaker is like a shell emitting the sound of the sea but from which the sea is absent. Such is the absence mourned in the Textes -- 'Et je les laisse dire, mes mots, qui ne sont pas à moi, moi ce mot, ce mot qu'ils disent, mais disent en vain'

<sup>1</sup> For Olga Bernal 'L'évolution de Murphy à Comment c'est consiste en une transformation graduelle du narrateur traditionnel en "citeur"' (Langage et fiction dans le roman de Beckett, p.82).

(NTPR, 205) -- but here accepted as a condition of speech.<sup>1</sup> It is this speaker's resignation that loses for him the heroic status of his predecessors.<sup>2</sup> He does not try to bend language to his will but accepts the imposition of images which obliterate truth: 'je ne cherche pas ni un langage à ma mesure à la mesure d'ici je ne cherche plus' (CC, 21). He does, however, still claim to be dealing with a universal experience; if his knowledge of life is a fiction, built of words unrelated either to himself or external reality, so is that of all men: 'l'écoute d'un seul de nos murmures et sa rédaction sont l'écoute et la rédaction de tous' (CC, 167). Stripped of externals, he is all men: 'moi l'ancien sans fin qui enterre toute la créature jusqu'au dernier con' (CC, 76), and his life is that of all humanity: 'une seule vie là-haut d'âge en âge' (CC, 89-90), 'une seule vie partout' (CC, 162).

#### IV. Story

In L'innommable the smatterings of stories which clung

<sup>1</sup> In existential terms Olga Bernal explains it thus: 'Dans Comment c'est, la solitude est cette absence de l'autre sans lequel je n'arrive pas à me sentir présent' (Langage et fiction dans le roman de Beckett, p. 222).

<sup>2</sup> If we read the categories of cylinder-dwellers in the later short text Le dépeupleur as relating to the different Beckettian heroes exploring Murphy's three zones of the mind, then the speaker of Comment c'est belongs to the fourth and final category: 'Quatrièmement ceux qui ne cherchent pas ... Par non-chercheurs ... il est impossible finalement d'entendre autre chose qu'ex-chercheurs' (p. 13), and they are soon referred to as 'les vaincus voués au sol pour toujours' (p. 20); the final figure that emerges is 'Le vieux vaincu de la troisième zone' (p. 54) -- a good description of the speaker of Comment c'est.



to each successive concretion of self were promptly dispersed lest they disguise its basic lack of historicity and distract the speaker from his goal of self-formulation. In Comment c'est, however, a single concretion is eagerly grasped and the rudimentary story elements provided by an ever-weakening imagination are developed to the utmost. The provision of a story does not represent a retreat into tradition on the part of the author; it must be seen as the disenchanted prop of narrative serving a creative consciousness which has already experienced the horror of the unnamability of reality. Arsene's warning, ignored by the Unnamable, is now taken for granted: 'what we know partakes in no small measure of the nature of what has so happily been called the unutterable or ineffable, so that any attempt to utter or eff it is doomed to fail, doomed, doomed to fail' (W,61). The speaker in Comment c'est accepts that the need for speech, for an anchorage in existence, entails the need for falsehood, so for him this lie is as good as any other. It is experience, and not just philosophical logic, that has disabused him, and the unrealistic tale of a creature crawling in a world of mud, his meeting, communication with and abandonment by another creature, is more acceptable to him in its remote formalism than a more socially realistic story could ever be. It is, in fact, an admirable choice for his purpose, which is to continue speaking despite an inverted consciousness deficient in imagery: 'tout ça presque blanc rien à en sortir presque rien rien à y

mettre' (CC,126), since it permits him to include all mental pictures that occur to him in his capacity as creator as part of the wavering stream of consciousness of his current "souffredouleur", this marginally human creature -- 'je m'endormirai encore dans l'humanité tout juste' (CC,54).<sup>1</sup>

This story is presented as another version of the same life related by earlier Beckettian narrators, introduced simply as 'ma vie présente rédaction' (CC,30); but now the specific mention of the act of literary composition openly associates the implied author with the fictional heroes. The arbitrary nature of the story and its impermanence are never disguised. The few elements of which it is composed are disposed of at its close: 'ces histoires de sacs déposés ... d'une oreille qui m'écoute ... ça de la foutaise oui Krim et Kram oui de la foutaise oui / ... / et cette histoire de procession ... jamais eu de procession non ni de voyage non jamais eu de Pim non ni de Bom non jamais eu personne non que moi' (CC,175). The simplicity of the elements makes their dismissal comparatively easy compared with the weight of detail normally provided by novelists -- this

<sup>1</sup> Humanity is clearly related to the power of speech, which is failing here and which the Bom/Pim relationship seeks to maintain: 'il vient le mot ... un seul suffit ... n'importe le premier qui vienne me rétablir dans mon rang' (CC,32). Hence the speaker can claim to be 'jamais désespéré tout à fait' (CC,153), since the voice is never finally silenced -- cf. the admission of Watt's 'loss of species' (W,82) when his world became unspeakable. The crawling movement, on the other hand, indicates the peripheral nature of the speaker's manhood, since Molloy has already related it to loss of human nature, crawling being a renunciation of 'la démarche debout, celle des hommes' (Mo,137).

applies to Sterne, Balzac, Joyce and Robbe-Grillet alike, despite their differing artistic aims. All other details in Comment c'est, apart from the basis of mud, are presented as mental images only and are not used to develop the story, merely to supplement it; even within the fiction they have no substance, and so require no dismissal beyond 'ces histoires de là-haut ... petites scènes oui de la foutaise' (CC,175); a single phrase can thus dispose of the bulk of the text. Facts, the sine qua non of a story,<sup>1</sup> are so severely restricted here that the tale woven around them can never be developed in sufficient variety or complexity to hold our attention and effect a suspension of disbelief. For this reason story never constitutes a threat, as it did even in L'innommable where possibilities for development were fearfully avoided by retreat into abstraction, but can be accepted for the hollow thing it is -- barely serving to keep the words flowing and laying no claims to reality in its own right.

Story serves, in Comment c'est, not only to give substance to the discourse, but also to give the novel some degree of coherence. From the chaos of the contents of consciousness the artist extracts a number of elements which he organises arbitrarily: 'd'une seule éternité en faire trois pour plus de clarté' (CC,29). The story sequence is set forth in the opening words of the novel: 'comment c'était je cite avant Pim avec Pim après Pim' (CC,9) and confirmed at the close: 'bon bon fin

<sup>1</sup> For Mary McCarthy, a 'deep love of fact' is the mark of the novelist and 'if the breath of scandal has not touched it, the book is not a novel' ('The Fact in Fiction', pp.440 & 454).



de la troisième partie et dernière voilà comment c'était fin de la citation après Pim comment c'est' (CC,177). This sequence acts as the drowning man's straw to be constantly clutched at when the central chaos threatens to overwhelm: 'comment c'était avant Pim dire ça d'abord ça l'ordre naturel' (CC,29) -- and with cunning irony "l'ordre naturel" appears to relate more to logic than the reality with which the word "nature" is commonly associated. The frequent reminders of the story sequence ultimately emphasise its basic insecurity; the shapeless mass of images from which it has been extracted is never wholly controlled, so that confusion among the three sections of the narrative is much in evidence. Indeed it is clear that, in contrast to the earlier novels, storyline in this novel is neither a threat to nor an escape from reality; it may be an organised fiction, but it is the only possible reality, albeit a subjective one, to the alienated consciousness, and it is now welcomed as such in preference to the chaos it so poorly masks. All the speaker's efforts are therefore concentrated on the maintenance of a semblance of order. Even the association with Pim is mildly organised, although with tongue in cheek: 'première leçon thème qu'il chante' (CC,77), 'fin de la première leçon deuxième série' (CC,83), 'deuxième leçon donc deuxième série même principe même déroulement troisième quatrième ainsi de suite' (CC,83). Since the order of the narrative is avowedly fortuitous and not intrinsic, and there is no danger of the

reader's being deceived, the notions of a beginning, middle and end are not as inappropriate as they were in earlier novels. A starting point is supplied in both time and place -- 'la boîte entamée remise dans le sac ... c'est le début de ma vie présente rédaction' (CC,11), 'comment échoué ici ... sans intérêt mais ici l'endroit où je commence cette fois' (CC,26) -- and that neither is supplied at the actual beginning of the text is symptomatic of the precariousness of the storyline. Location in the text is so often attempted that it is clearly more for the speaker's benefit than for ours: 'la main plonge au lieu de la fange familière une fesse ... fin de la première partie' (CC,59), 'ici donc enfin deuxième partie' (CC,63), 'ma main gauche à présent deuxième partie seconde moitié que fait-elle' (CC,82), 'vite donc fin enfin de la deuxième ... plus enfin que la troisième et dernière' (CC,121); this is particularly the case when the parts get confused, as near the end of Part One: 'chez Pim ... Les fesses étaient pareilles ... quelque chose là qui ne va pas mais d'abord en finir avec ma vie de voyageur première partie ... plus que la deuxième puis la troisième' (CC,45). The end is categoric, sharply contrasting with the other novels: 'bon bon fin de la troisième partie et dernière ...' (CC,177).<sup>1</sup>

As in Watt, the narrator's obsession with schematisation is ubiquitous. However, where formerly it gradually undermined the reader's confidence in the validity of the story, here it

<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately the English translation "part one", "part two", "part three", loses the punning echo of the title Endgame, and the gentle suggestion that the whole construction is a game in the endlessly recurring "partie", cf. Fin de partie.

serves to strengthen his acceptance of the practical value of story as a means of providing that degree of order to the discourse which the speaker undoubtedly requires if he is to continue. The shattered self is partitioned into endless fictional creatures; the temporal continuum is arranged into three parts; even the notebooks in which the words are noted undergo division into 'un cahier pour le corps ... / un second pour le bafouillage du mot à mot ... un troisième celui-ci pour mes commentaires' (CC,100-1), although not for long: 'l'idée des trois cahiers restée sans suite' (CC,102). The mania for organisation achieves the apocalyptic vision in which the moving chain of torturers and tortured are synchronised: 'à l'instant où je quitte Bem un autre quitte Pim si nous sommes cent mille à cet instant précis cinquante mille départs cinquante mille abandonnés ... le même instant toujours partout' (CC,136). There is never any question of fixing events as an irrevocable series in time, however; since the organisation is imposed, the sequence, despite iterative insistence that it is "l'ordre naturel", is arbitrary, and much of the book's humour (even if there is 'détérioration de sens de l'humour': CC,22) is derived from this fact. The whole sequence is debunked with equanimity: 'on peut l'imaginer rien ne vous en empêche mélanger changer l'ordre naturel jouer avec ça' (CC,130), 'que de la présente communication donc connaissance soit prise à l'envers et qu'une fois parcourue de gauche à droite



le cours en soit remonté de droite à gauche rien ne s'y oppose / à condition que par un effort d'imagination l'épisode du couple demeuré central soit rectifié comme il convient' (CC,160).

The weakness for paradigms which produced the chain of creatures, combined with the speaker's devastating logic, ultimately upsets his whole construction. Since 'les deux solitudes celle du voyage et celle de l'abandon diffèrent sensiblement' (CC,158), he suffers 'l'impression fugitive je cite qu'à vouloir présenter en trois parties ou épisodes une affaire qui à bien y regarder en comporte quatre on risque d'être incomplet / qu'à cette troisième partie qui s'achève enfin devrait normalement s'ajouter une quatrième' (CC,157).<sup>1</sup> And thus the temporary and contingent nature of the story is further emphasised: 'donc deux rédactions possibles la présente et l'autre qui commencerait là où celle-ci finit' (CC,159). The version offered, however, meets the main requirement: man begins and ends in solitude, and the human relationship, the couple, lies at the heart of the fiction. Indeed the most striking aspect of the story is its ironic structure. Its direction and organisation depend on the figure of Pim, being the story of life before, with and after him. His negation at the end of the novel therefore removes the kingpin

<sup>1</sup> Molloy's trouble with his sucking stones comes to mind here: 'en renonçant à l'arrimage, c'était à un besoin physique' (Mo,113). His final solution 'de foutre toutes mes pierres en l'air, sauf une' (Mo,113) is reflected in the collapse of the whole structure of Comment c'est, while his ironic comment, 'au fond je me moquais éperdument de me sentir en déséquilibre' (Mo,113), rings true for the speaker's attitude to his elaborations in Comment c'est also.

from the structure and the whole relapses into the chaos from which it was extracted. The final lines of L'innommable leave us with a consciousness, a voice that struggles on; at the close of Comment c'est we are left with nothing except the impression of having experienced an illusion: 'tout l'histoire d'un bout à l'autre oui complètement faux oui' (CC,174).<sup>1</sup>

#### V. Narrative Movement

Comment c'est achieves a curious reconciliation between the circular movement of the early novels and the linear movement of Malone meurt and L'innommable. For Beckett the straight line and the circle evoke man and humanity, the individual and the universal, time and eternity. That these matters are considered by him in structural terms is clear from his early essay on Joyce in which he discusses the structure of Finnegans Wake: for Joyce 'Humanity is devine, but no man is devine';<sup>2</sup> the novel expresses history through the individual, the concretion of the universal, and the movement of history is cyclical. In Comment c'est Beckett produces his own version of the four divisions of the

<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is one of the novel's means of intimating the alienated artist's sense of life as illusory and ephemeral like that of Moran's flies (Mo,252 & 257). Indeed where Moran's image for the swift passage of life is 'une vitesse d'éphémère' (Mo,230), the later English version reintroduces the fly motif: 'swiftly as a day-fly' (T,149), and it is surely this fly imagery that is referred to in Comment c'est where the insignificance of man is continually being emphasised: 'cette mouche peut-être glissant sur la vitre ... tout l'été devant elle ou midi' (CC,107), 'le soleil se lève sa journée commence la mouche on parle d'une mouche' (CC,108).

<sup>2</sup> 'Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce', p.7.

Joycean structure as he discerns them -- birth, marriage/maturity, death and rebirth. Joyce's essentially social cycle is stripped and isolated by Beckett to become the solitary journey ('la belle époque ... j'étais jeune' : CC,57), the couple and the abandonment, with the fourth part, rebirth, reluctantly projected as the ineluctable future, but not included -- rebirth being envisaged as the victim's era, from whom language, equated with life, is extracted through suffering.<sup>1</sup> There is even a hint of the parodic intent of the divisions during the comic attempts at temporal measurement: 'sachant d'autre part pour l'avoir entendu que les quatre phases par lesquelles nous passons les deux sortes de solitudes les deux sortes de compagnies par lesquelles ... nous passons et repassons étant réglés ainsi sont de durée égale' (CC,151). Beckett's Viconian cycle is more sterile, more stylised, more condensed and infinitely more agonising than Joyce's, but the structural similarities are nonetheless noteworthy.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Where the Wake rejoices at the prospect of rebirth, for Beckett it is: 'un soupir arraché à celui dont le silence est le seul bien' (CC,173) -- a further example of the recurring death-wish.

<sup>2</sup> Eugene Webb relates the three-part structure to the Sonata form, with exposition, development and recapitulation. Two objections come to mind: firstly, too many themes have to be omitted to follow Mr. Webb's reading of thematic exposition, development and recapitulation -- the text really refuses to be forced into such tight organisation; secondly, such a plan seems foreign to Beckett's art; his forms grow from within and abhor the solidity of a set order. Amusingly enough, Beckett actually makes fun of such an intent in a passage from 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women': 'The Syra Cusa' belongs to another story ... a far far better one.... We could chain her up with the Smeraldina-Rima and the little Alba ... and make it look like a sonata, with recurrence of themes, key signatures, plagal finale and all' (Harvey, p.344); see Webb, pp. 163-166.



From the point of view of narrative movement, then, the problem for Beckett is that humanity or the universal is atemporal or eternal, and eternity is non-progressive or circular, while man, the individual, exists in time which is linear; a further complication arises from the awareness that the written word is linear while the repetitive nature of fiction is circular. The linear movement in Comment c'est is apparent in its three-part structure with the directional, before/with/after story suggesting a beginning, middle and end; however the projected fourth part hints that the line is curved not straight and will ultimately close in a circle. In physical terms, the creature moves compulsively forward: 'effet de l'espoir ... de l'éternelle ligne droite effet du bon désir de ne pas mourir avant terme' (CC,57), expressing his disinclination to comply with the urge to live (when life is speech then linear movement in the abstract becomes the line on the page) by a comical modification of direction: 'et j'avance en zigzag ça c'est vrai conformément à ma complexion' (CC,57). The development of the procession extends the linear image: 'ceux qui se traînent devant ceux qui se traînent derrière ... cortège sans fin de sacs crevés au profit de tous' (CC,58). The repetitive nature of fictional creation is presented in terms of the recurring actions of members of the chain: 'à l'instant où Pim rejoint l'autre reformer avec lui le seul couple qu'avec celui qu'il forme avec moi il forme Bem me rejoint reformer avec moi le seul couple ...' (CC,137) -- and the battology (which Watt

so much disliked) emphasises the point; this is the action of his endlessly relived story: 'une vieille histoire ma vieille vie chaque fois que Pim me quitte jusqu'à ce que Bom me retrouve' (CC,160).

The working out of the chainlike movement brings the suggestion that ultimately the ends of the procession meet: 'B à C C à D d'enfer en home ... Z à A oubli divin' (CC,97); similarly with the postulation of a finite number of creatures in the chain to facilitate its clear conception and organisation: 'le numéro 999 999 au lieu de se lancer dans le désert vers une victime inexistante se dirige vers le numéro 1' (CC,142). The circular movement is dismissed, however, as a need pertaining to imagery of the external world only: 'ici ... nous ne tournons pas en rond / ça c'est là-haut dans la lumière où l'espace leur est compté ici la ligne droite ... vers l'est ... c'est curieux alors qu'à l'ouest la mort en général' (CC,149).<sup>1</sup> The significance of the west/east motion is in itself ambivalent: where "ici" is the world of words then the movement is from left to right -- the accepted position of west and east on the printed page -- so that in this sense the reference specifies the linear movement of the written word; but where "ici" is the "little world of the mind" the movement indicates the historical cycle ending in

<sup>1</sup> Organisational problems arise when the procession is visualised, so that reduction to one or extension to infinity, where the question of order cannot apply, solves the problem of attempting to treat all alike. It does, however, raise another problem, the difficulty of conception -- 'mais ça doit pouvoir se faire une procession en ligne droite sans queue ni tête' (CC,150) -- which is at the heart of the malaise of the creative consciousness.

rebirth, since east symbolises birth.<sup>1</sup> And rebirth, where life depends on speech ('la voix quaquà d'où je tiens ma vie': CC,137), implies repetition. The two interpretations of the image, as language and as cyclical life, are even amusingly fused in 'la lenteur de notre procession de gauche en est' (CC,152).

The linear movement of the written word is ultimately absorbed in the circular movement of fiction. Within Beckett's oeuvre, Comment c'est becomes another turn of the circle of fictional creation, another telling of the old tale, the same life viewed from a different angle -- 'les chemins surtout ... comme ils changeaient suivant le ciel et où on allait ... l'océan suivant qu'on allait aux îles ou en revenait l'humeur du moment' (CC,89), 'voilà à moi ce dont j'ai besoin ... des aspects changeants voilà de la même vie' (CC,90).<sup>2</sup> The circular process is suggested in the refrains of "présent rédaction" and "cette fois", the incessant indications of age -- 'bonne vieille question', 'les vieux mots', 'moi l'ancien sans fin', 'le vieux chemin', 'quelques vieux pourris de la vieille azur', 'le vieil aujourd'hui', 'une voix ancienne', 'une vieille histoire ma vieille vie'<sup>3</sup> -- and, of course, in the punning words of the title,

<sup>1</sup> Ludovic Janvier points out that it is a journey 'de la fin à l'origine' (Janvier, p.143), indicating a hope of future birth in language; and both Murphy and Beckett moved eastward.

<sup>2</sup> The echo of Moran's words, 'Mais les chemins changent d'aspect refaits en sens inverse' (Mo,256), emphasises the point, indicating the single consciousness, the closed system of language, in which all the works have their origin and their limits.

<sup>3</sup> See CC,48, 51, 76, 77, 117, 125, 132, 160.



comment c'est/commencer (unhappily lost in English where the leitmotif "comment c'était comment c'est" loses much of its significance as "how it was how it is") -- words which close the novel and hint at what the Unnamable describes as 'l'obligation ... de recommencer, à partir de nulle part, de personne et de rien, pour y aboutir à nouveau' (I,30).<sup>1</sup>

## VI. Narrative Control

The creative process in Comment c'est, as in L'innommable, is a battle with the void threatening the interiorised consciousness totally alienated from external reality. Here, however, the 'soul-landscape' (W,249) is even more impoverished; imagination becomes 'presque blanc qui fut si orné' (CC,126) and, far from feeling the need to control the frail images which arise, this speaker has to strain his senses increasingly as the novel progresses to catch an image or sound to keep him going: 'serrer les yeux ... pas les bleus les autres d'autres derrière voir quelque chose quelque part après Pim plus que ça le souffle dans la tête' (CC,127). The Unnamable still tried to reconcile the need for falsifying speech with the aim of truthful self-expression, but this speaker admits the hopelessness of the quest for self: 'cherchant ce que j'ai perdu là où je n'ai jamais été' (CC,57); for him the problems of isolated consciousness are overriding:

<sup>1</sup> The love of puns which Beckett shares with Joyce produced a similar device in Finnegans Wake to indicate the cyclical movement of life: there too the title is echoed in the closing lines: 'Us then. Finn, again! Take....' (Finnegans Wake, 1939, p.628).

'quel soleil de quoi j'ai parlé n'importe j'ai parlé c'est ce qu'il fallait vu quelque chose' (CC,105). The 'struggle for life ou élan vital' (MM,130), recognised by the dying Malone, drives the artist to resist obliteration, so that he admits, since to be conscious one must be conscious of something, 'si rien j'invente faut s'occuper sinon la mort' (CC,100). If life in physical terms is reduced here to the struggle for breath,<sup>1</sup> mentally it is presented as no more than an effort to remain conscious, and the speaker concentrates all his attention on the need to feed the monologue: 'je ne dis plus je cite est-ce moi ... je dis seulement comment durer comment durer' (CC,20). Three means are available to him to fight annihilation: depiction of the contents of consciousness, discussion of the literary product and examination of the creative process; and all three are drawn on to provide the substance of the novel.

The images of consciousness are either systematically invoked as representing the speaker's present condition -- 'je me vois à plat ventre ferme les yeux pas les bleus les autres derrière et me vois sur le ventre' (CC,11) -- or involuntary and

<sup>1</sup> When one considers the dependence of Beckett's theatre on material presence ('Hamm as stated, and Clov as stated, together as stated ... in such a place, and in such a world, that's all I can manage, more than I could', 'Beckett's Letters on Endgame' p.15), his most recent product for the theatre, Breath, in which life is dramatised as a single inspiration and expiration of breath (again concerned with man's paltriness), appears as the logical, if barren, outcome of this enervation. Indeed it is only as theatre that the end foreseen in Comment c'est could be portrayed: 'cette voix ces bribes ne sera plus rien enfin mais sans cesser ... / ça oui un halètement dans le noir la boue à ça que ça aboutit le voyage le couple l'abandon' (CC,155).

disorganised evocations of the excluded realm of external reality -- 'vie dans la lumière première image un quidam quelconque', 'autre image dans mon molse jamais aussi propre depuis' (CC,11 & 12). For description of his present state he has only to return to his project -- 'comment c'était ... avant Pim avec Pim après Pim ... trois parties' (CC,9) -- to maintain a semblance of logical order (hence the frequent re-statement of the project). The predominance of order, indeed, implies the opposition of the text to the chaos of reality: 'le cul à sang les nerfs à vif on invente mais comment savoir imaginaire réel' (CC,89). The uncontrolled images, 'songes choses souvenirs impossibles vies' (CC,99), although 'inventée remémorée un peu de chaque comment savoir' (CC,89), seem closer to outer reality because of their very disorder and uncontrollableness. Thus they can include the reality of the writer's social past -- 'la tête géante coiffée de fleurs et d'oiseaux se penche sur mes boucles' (CC,19)<sup>1</sup> -- and his literary past -- 'd'abord en finir avec ma vie de voyageur première partie avant Pim ... / du temps où je rasais encore les murs au milieu de mes semblables et frères' (CC,45-6)<sup>2</sup> -- without ringing false, since both belong

<sup>1</sup> See the photograph 'Samuel Beckett at his mother's knee' reproduced in Beckett at 60: A Festschrift, (1967), opposite p.24 (ed. John Calder).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Molloy's vision of himself as rejected and hunted by men: 'C'est le matin qu'il faut se cacher ... vers les quatre ou cinq heures ... on rase les murs, sagement courbé' (Mo,101). The two passages also indicate the increased alienation of the present speaker since, for him, Molloy's experience was as part of the body of mankind; Molloy is thus giving, by implication, another version of the first part of Comment c'est "avant Pim".



among the artist's disorganised memories. Even his dreams are acceptable -- 'on me donne un rêve ... d'une petite femme à ma portée ... j'ai ça dans ma vie cette fois' (CC,17) -- since dreams are a familiar part of life in the light. This speaker's narrative control, then, works as the reverse of Malone's. Malone managed to achieve a semblance of order in his escapes from his present condition into fictional creation. His fictions too were probably a mixture of memories and inventions, but they were ordered at least to the extent that they were deliberately invoked and their subject-matter and sequence were planned, even if the plans were not strictly adhered to. His physical condition, however, was presented as beyond his control. Here, on the other hand, the progress of the materialised self is fairly faithfully planned and recorded, although, as in Malone meurt the underlying chaos does impinge. This creature is an accepted fiction -- 'la part d'invention énorme' (CC,89) -- so that his presentation can be logical, where the view of Malone as a temporary materialisation of the creative consciousness is only clear in retrospect (after the experience of the Unnamable has been undergone) and the account of his uncertain, disorderly physical existence attempts to reflect some degree of truth. Purely mental images now seem closer to reality<sup>1</sup> and therefore would be incompatible with a schematisation such as Malone applies to

<sup>1</sup> The speaker's progressive alienation in the novel is apparent in that in Part Two the pictures in the mind are further removed by being relegated to Pim, and in Part Three images of life in the light are past.

his imaginative flights; thus they are beyond control here and come and go without rein: 'c'est fini ça s'éteint comme une lampe qu'on souffle' (CC,19). As the images fail, leaving the consciousness in need of sustenance, the accessible fiction of the materialised self can be called on to fill the gap: 'un moment encore matin d'avril sous la boue c'est fini c'est fait ça s'éteint j'ai eu l'image la scène reste vide quelques bêtes puis s'éteint plus de bleu je reste là / là-bas à droite dans la boue la main s'ouvre et se referme ça m'aide' (CC,38).

### VII. Narrative Material

Constant awareness of the creative act generates much of the material of which this latest novel is composed. Interiorisation leaves the artist's consciousness with no other resources upon which to draw other than himself: 'vivre sans visiteurs présente rédaction sans autres histoires que les miennes autres bruits que les miens autre silence que celui que je dois rompre si je n'en veux plus c'est avec ça que je dois durer' (CC,16). Comments on the literary product and the creative process are compatible with the view of the novel as a closed system (a recurring symbol in Beckett's work) referring to nothing beyond itself, and a useful source of subject-matter where the creative urge is up against an atrophied consciousness. The book includes repeated assertions of its own structure: the before/with/after sequence, 'ma vie dans l'ordre plus ou moins' (CC,32); its content: 'ma vie dernier état mal dite mal entendue', 'la vie l'autre

dans la lumière que j'aurais eue par instants... quelques images par instants' (CC,9 & 10); the manner of its telling: 'en moi qui furent dehors quand ça cesse de haleter bribes d'une voix ancienne en moi pas la mienne/.../recueillie quand même ... quelqu'un qui écoute un autre qui note ou le même' (CC,9-10); and its relation to truth: 'si Bom ne venait pas ... mais alors comment finir ... de l'imagination donc et la suite' (CC,98), 'je cite toujours mes voyages imaginaires frères imaginaires' (CC,139). Devices for maintaining narrative flow are incorporated as subject-matter: 'je la [ma main] porte vers mon visage c'est une ressource quand tout fait défaut' (CC,17), 'voilà un autre objet en arrière c'est une autre de mes ressources plus maintenant' (CC,30), 'vite une supposition si cette boue ...' (CC,65), 'chers chiffres quand tout fait défaut' (CC,57), 'petite suite pour durer encore' (CC,56).

The incorporation of the creative process as part of the discourse heightens the reader's awareness of the functional nature of the narrative material, as do the refrains: "durer un moment avec ça", "ça s'enchaîne toujours", and their variations. Any subject is better than none when the aim is speech rather than the more ambitious goal of truth which haunted earlier Beckettian narrators: 'la boîte l'ouvre-boîte ces détails de préférence à rien' (CC,41). Thus the proliferative tendency of images already exploited by the Unnamable is elevated here to a basic creative principle. Any image that will expand is



permitted to do so in order to provide much needed material. The couple becomes a procession extended in space -- 'ceux qui se traînent devant ceux qui se traînent derrière' (CC,58) -- and time -- 'tous les Pim bourreaux promus victimes passées si jamais ça passe et futures' (CC,131); numbers become infinitely expansible: 'si on n'est pas des billions en ce moment et pourquoi pas puisqu'on voilà deux on le fut des billions à ramper' (CC,65); the scribe becomes 'le scribe nom Krim générations de scribes' (CC,98), extending to Kram Sept and Kram Neuf (CC,101); the central consciousness not only sub-divides into perceiver, perceived, hearer, scribe, voice, but even momentarily shows Krim's dynastic propensity: 'la voix leur voix à tous ... quels tous merde je suis le treizième du nom' (CC,102);<sup>1</sup> even the story is elastic: 'chacun dans sa première partie / ou dans sa cinquième ou dans sa neuvième ou dans sa treizième ainsi de suite' (CC,141). In contrast to the Unnamable's need to keep this proliferative tendency under a measure of control, since his policy is to retract all statements, 'D'abord salir, ensuite nettoyer' (I,25), the creator of Comment c'est has to fight the self-annihilating predisposition of all the images in order to keep his world in existence. Consequently, although multiplication brings problems of order in its wake, the sorting of the problems really provides welcome additional material, and reduction is to be

<sup>1</sup> Probably also a reference to preceding heroes; if we count them as Belacqua, Murphy, Watt, Mercier, Camier, the hero of the Nouvelles, Molloy, Moran, Malone, The Unnamable, the speaker of the Textes, the hero of From an Abandoned Work and the present speaker, that comes to thirteen.

avoided: 'si au contraire je suis seul alors plus de problème solution que sans un sérieux effort d'imagination il semble difficile d'éviter' (CC,142). And it is when the speaker finally admits to being 'seul dans la boue oui le noir oui' (CC,176) that the novel's close becomes inevitable.

#### VIII. Narrative Organisation

Time is largely subservient to logic as an organising principle in Comment c'est, even more so than in Watt, the organisation of which is so similar; not only does Comment c'est draw on logical mental processes, series, causality, and association of ideas, to provide material, but it also uses the same type of before/with/after sequence to give direction. Part One is forward-looking insofar as Pim lies ahead; but it is largely filled with images from 'la vie dans la lumière' (CC,12) which relate to the past. Part Three is backward-looking since Pim is past and the Bom of the future is a conjecture only whose reality is outwith the bounds of the novel; but its bulk consists of the logical investigation of the hypothetical procession (which cannot but recall the monstrously developed consideration of Mr. Knott's food into the series of dogs and the Lynch dynasty) which is atemporal. Only Part Two is anchored in the fictional time-scale, being principally concerned with the establishment of a relationship with Pim, although it does include both images of social reality and lengthy postulations (the scribe series).

The novel moves progressively further and further into abstraction; as the fleeting pictures of the external world decrease, hypotheses increase in order to fill the gap: 'les images viennent au début première partie elles vont cesser' (CC,13); time becomes less and less relevant, and the time-scale of the central section, the only one to make itself felt to any extent is demolished with the negation of Pim, and in any event is undermined by frequent gibing comments.

#### IX. The Time Factor

As in L'innommable, the time in which the story is organised 'ne passe pas ... il vient s'entasser autour de vous' (I,210), and chronology has to be extracted from this heap of piled-up seconds. But here, where the reader is so intensely aware of the narrative as a re-telling of the same old story, the future too is part of the chaotic mass of disjointed seconds. As Professor Coe explains it: 'all time, past, present and future, has resolved itself into an instantaneous present ... because past, present and future are cyclical, and every series of acts in time repeats itself to infinity'.<sup>1</sup> The novel's temporal arrangement, then, is imposed on eternity -- 'd'une seule éternité en faire trois pour plus de clarté' (CC,29) -- and its disjointed flow of seconds is extracted from it -- 'quelques minutes par-ci par-là additionnées énorme l'éternité même ordre

<sup>1</sup> Coe, pp.82-83.



de grandeur' (CC,127). But just as the images of the mind can never adhere to form a historical life, so the moments can never come together to provide a convincing chronology: 'à vrai dire tout ici discontinu voyage images tourment voire solitude troisième partie où une voix parle puis se tait' (CC,152). The Unnamable could not compile passing moments to make a life, and neither can the present speaker: 'l'instant qui passe c'est tout mon passé ... le reste faux' (CC,20); consequently the temporal scheme in which he sets his action ('dix mètres quinze mètres demi-flanc gauche pied droit main droite pousse tire': CC,49) is never sufficiently secure to act as an organising principle. The introduction of temporally dislocated images do not, therefore, disrupt the narrative order as one might expect since, again as in L'Innommable, the only valid time-scale is that of the creative consciousness portrayed in the act of fictional creation. Thus in Part One the 'question si je suis heureux' (CC,22) immediately brings an image of Pim to mind<sup>1</sup> without interrupting the word-stream: 'la main plonge au lieu de la fange familière une fesse sur le ventre lui aussi avant ça quoi encore ça suffit je pars' (CC,23). Images of life in the light used to expand Part Two can be set temporally in Part One ('les rideaux s'écartaient première partie je voyais les amis venus le voir': CC,66) yet belong logically where they are -- mention

<sup>1</sup> Moments of happiness evoked in the leitmotifs "un bon moment", "de bons moments" are usually associated with the period in which the solitude is broken.

of the finger-nails with which Pim will be tortured reminds him of an oriental sage whose nails pierced his clenched hands and grew after death, a story which can only have been directly accessible to him in the first part of his narrative, before Pim became the intermediary through whom life in the light is related. The same image leads to a temporal leap forward to Part Three: 'les ongles qui peuvent continuer la main morte ... / impossible de continuer moi on parle de moi pas Pim Pim est fini il a fini moi maintenant dans la troisième' (CC,106), since in Part Three the voice, like the nails growing, continues although Pim, source of speech or life ('la voix extorquée quelques mots la vie parce que ça crie': CC,148), is gone. And Part Three even posits an extension of the past beyond the confines of the book: 'Bem était venu se coller contre moi voir plus tard Pim et moi' (CC,133), and of the future: 'et Bom et moi quatrième partie ce que ça sera' (CC,148).

Structured time is regarded in this novel as relevant only to life in the light which is excluded from the interiorised world; but its vocabulary still appears: 'ces mots de ceux pour qui sous qui la terre tourne et tout tourne ces mots encore ici jours nuits années saisons cette famille' (CC,21). The old words slip out in the attempts to schematise life with Pim: 'le jour arrive ce mot encore nous y arrivons au bout de combien pas de chiffres un temps énorme où ...' (CC,78), 'un temps énorme jusqu'au jour ce mot encore où ...' (CC,83); even when related

to the hypothetical procession they cause uneasiness: 'entendre jour le répéter le murmurer ne pas avoir honte comme s'il y avait une terre un soleil des moments où il fait moins noir plus noir là rire' (CC,133). A chronology can only be set for the action of life in the mud in the sense of a sequence of disconnected instants -- thus life with Pim is littered with "puis", "ensuite", "enfin" to give the impression of continuity.<sup>1</sup> But it is a formal chronology, unmeasurable, and unrelated to the external world; hence the pleasure of listening to Pim's watch ticking, since it momentarily sets the speaker in the perspective of history: 'je bois les secondes longuement moments délicieux et perspectives' (CC,73). Essentially it is an arbitrary imposition on the timelessness of the alienated consciousness, so that every event comes as a temporal shock: 'soudain comme tout ce qui n'était pas puis est' (CC,14 & 69), 'soudain au loin le pas la voix rien puis soudain quelque chose quelque chose puis soudain rien soudain au loin le silence' (CC,16); and we return to the reconciliation of time and eternity in the image of unidentifiable points in circular time: 'puis soudain comme tout ce qui commence recommence comment savoir partir repartir' (CC,76). The temporal structure imposed on the mental world to accommodate the fictional action is basically a linguistic trick to give the illusion of forward movement: ' Brusque série sujet objet sujet

<sup>1</sup> This continuity is also sought by the speaker whose sense of existence depends on the images of self and the persistence of the voice: 'la bouche soudain qui s'agite ... puis soudain ligne droite ... où suis-je passé puis soudain derechef puis puis où vais-je de puis en puis et entre' (CC,117).



objet coup sur coup et en avant' (CC,14), and to satisfy the obsessive need for order of the human mind, even in the face of the void: 'avoir le chronomètre de Pim ... et rien à chronométrer je ... ne vois plus rien ne fais plus rien ... / la voix chronométrer la voix ... le silence chronométrer le silence ça pourrait m'aider' (CC,48-9).

Since all fictional time, past, present and future, is massed into the present of the creative consciousness, verbal tenses too serve merely to structure the discourse: 'les temps qui se mélangent dans ma tête tous les temps avant pendant après des temps énormes' (CC,130). The tense used simply depends on the point of view -- from which point on the circle of time the sequence is considered: 'avec Pim deuxième partie plus que la troisième et dernière c'est là où j'ai ma vie où je l'ai eue où je l'aurai' (CC,63). It is this cycle that is invoked in the opening lines of the novel, permitting its beginning to be introduced verbally in the past and the ending which lies ahead in the present: 'comment c'était je cite avant Pim avec Pim après Pim comment c'est' (CC,9). As Ludovic Janvier points out, all three sections open with an imperfect, "comment c'était", directly opposed to the present tense of the title Comment c'est; as he sees it there are 'trois en-tête successifs qui nous parlent d'un passé mesuré depuis un "après" qui l'aurait digéré totalement'.<sup>1</sup> The opposition may also be seen to arise from the fact

<sup>1</sup> Janvier, p.140 -- for M. Janvier the two tenses form a problematical contradiction.

that the tenses relate to two different temporal planes, the endless present of the creative consciousness and the endlessly repeating and therefore essentially past order of fiction: 'des bribes au présent des choses si anciennes les entends les murmure telles quelles' (CC,25). Thus the Part Three "après Pim", described in the novel, is fixed in a fictional order of past, present and future which is anterior to the instantaneous present of the creative moment, the "here and now" of the creative consciousness which cannot be trapped in fiction since in the act of setting it down on paper it falls into the past. The present tense of the fiction and of the creative act are separated by an unmeasurable temporal distance indicated in the leitmotifs "un temps énorme", "des temps énormes": 'je cite un moment donné loin derrière un temps énorme' (CC,10). The "How it is" of the title is not to be found in the novel itself, but rather in the blank space following the final words: 'fin de la troisième partie ... voilà comment c'était fin de la citation après Pim comment c'est' (CC,177); the tenses of fiction and fictional creation are incompatible -- language can never catch up with the present moment. The account of "How it is" belongs to the unwritten Part Four which presents life from the point of view of Pim, the one who lives: 'mais nous ne verrons jamais Bom à l'oeuvre haletant ... je resterai en souffrance la voix étant ainsi faite ...que de notre vie totale elle ne dit que les trois quarts' (CC,157).

It is as part of a fictional cycle of tenses that the speaker

unconcernedly notes the verbal inconsistencies: 'au présent tout ça des choses si anciennes' (CC,24), 'au présent plus ou moins' (CC,32), 'au présent mais loin loin un temps énorme' (CC,10). Significantly Part Two, the heart of the fiction, clings more to the past tense, removing it even further from reality: 'voilà un passé cette partie va peut-être vouloir marcher au passé' (CC,65); the past indefinite -- 'j'ai cru déceler ...' (CC,64) -- even retreats into the more fictional past definite -- 'il dut les entendre crisser le beau passé que voilà' (CC,66). Temporary relapse into a fictional present tense reminds the speaker of the lack of continuity between past and present: 'ça ne marche pas au passé non plus je n'aurai jamais de passé jamais eu' (CC,67); but the narrative tense continues to vary without giving cause for anxiety: 'ça continue au passé ah vivement que du passé tout au passé Bom venu moi disparu' (CC,76), 'au présent ça repart au présent' (CC,79), 'retombons dans le passé' (CC,112). The whole structure, in fact, ends up as an object of ridicule, when the speaker postulates alternative sequences for the narrative: 'au lieu d'un premier passé d'un second passé et d'un présent un passé un présent et un futur quelque chose là qui ne va pas' (CC,156).

The real anxiety in this novel is caused by the lack of continuity in the stream of consciousness of the speaker. These uncontrollable gaps in the flow of images and words were already causing distress in the later stages of L'innommable, but here they assume immense proportions: 'pertes partout' (CC,9), 'question



ce qu'il vient de dire plutôt moi d'entendre ... le tiers les deux cinquièmes ou alors tout' (CC,112), 'tant de mots tant de perdus un sur trois deux sur cinq le son puis le sens même proportion ou bien aucun j'entends tout' (CC,116) -- and the confusion regarding responsibility for the breaks indicates the impossibility of ascertaining whether the world is inherently chaotic and discontinuous or whether the failure is in man's consciousness. The gaps are portrayed as a loss of pictures in the mind and absence of language: 'ma main ne vient pas les mots ne viennent pas aucun mot même muet j'en ai besoin d'un mot de ma main' (CC,22), and their frequency is indicated by numerous motifs of blank spaces and silences: 'bref noir', 'long silence', 'j'ai de ces sautes', 'je ne vois pas', 'petits blancs', 'ce vaste trou-là ... ce vaste laps-là'.<sup>1</sup> The very typography with its short, disjunctive blocks of speech reflects the fractured consciousness of the speaker: 'les blancs sont les trous sinon ça coule plus ou moins grands les trous ... impossible d'indiquer ... je les reconnais attends la suite ou me trompe' (CC,104). The gaps are incorporated in the narrative as much as possible (as in Malone meurt) once Pim is there to bear the blame -- 'coup sur le crâne long silence temps énorme', (CC,93), 'alors ça peut changer pas de réponse finir pas de réponse' (CC,177) -- but essentially they are blanks in the instantaneous present of the creative consciousness indicating a lack of se-

<sup>1</sup> See CC,37, 92, 108, 111, 125, 131.

quence in the speaker's sense of existence which depends on the word-flow. The only world his interiorised consciousness is capable of projecting consists of a broken series of flickering pictures in the mind. No amount of straining of the senses can give it solidity or coherence so that the whole creative process is troubled by a sense of uneasiness, an awareness of failure, of inability to create a meaningful or complete structure -- "quelque chose là qui m'échappe", "il manque quelque chose", "quelque chose là qui a sauté" forming refrains to reinforce the recurring indication of dissatisfaction with the narrative: "quelque chose là qui ne va pas".<sup>1</sup>

#### X. The Thematic Factor

The thematic structure of Comment c'est is of vital importance to the novel's cohesion. The quest theme fundamental to all the novels reappears here in several forms, since the book embodies the highly ambiguous attitude of the artist to the self he seeks through his art. In one sense this novel tells the story of the Unnamable's experience -- discovery of the impossibility of giving substance to selfhood, that there is no conceivable absolute self. The experience of the earlier narrator was set in the present, but here the quest for self -- insofar as

<sup>1</sup> The significance of these gaps in the flow of language appears in a passage of 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women', where Belacqua speaks of 'the incoherent continuum as expressed by, say, Rimbaud and Beethoven.... The terms of whose statements serve merely to delimit the reality of insane areas of silence, whose audibilities are no more than punctuation in a statement of silences. How do they get from point to point. That is what I meant by the incoherent reality ....' (Harvey, pp.434-435, n.16). Comment c'est records the passage "from point to point".

Pim bears witness to the reality of self (or the scribe, 'on dit qu'un témoin qu'il me faudrait un témoin': CC,22, or 'une oreille quelque part là-haut': CC,162) -- is set in the past (a tense which for Beckett automatically invalidates) and the Other on whom existence depends is dismissed as illusory even before he is created: 'pousse tire vers Pim il n'existe pas' (CC,33). For the Unnamable, the self was the only possible subject for speech, but he found in the end that his notion of self was a verbal tautology. For this latest speaker, then, the language itself has become the subject, and its logical, self-generating processes are given free rein. Words make up the only self accessible to the artist, so his book sets out the words of which he feels his inner being is composed. Language is thus presented as a closed system -- hence the extensive repetition in the text -- which has all the "bodytightness" of Murphy's mind, the novel as a linguistic structure also seeming to be 'a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without' (M,76). But as the accessible self is false, disguising the underlying void, so the book is denied validity. The Unnamable discovered that the artist's notion of life is a fiction, so the speaker of Comment c'est sets about creating a fiction in order to continue living: 'ma voix sinon rien donc rien sinon ma voix donc ma voix' (CC,116). He is thereby creating a self in the existential sense; the truth of his being lies not in the work of art but in the act of its creation: 'un mot et je



resuis' (CC,32). Since the existential self has no past, the book resulting from the creative act is irrelevant to the quest for the core of being, only the moment of writing is valid:

'l'instant qui passe c'est tout mon passé ... le reste faux' (CC,20). The quest theme thus paradoxically justifies the construction of the verbal edifice while at the same time requiring its destruction.

The battle with language is over in Comment c'est and the speaker is resigned to his inability to relate words either to phenomena or the self: 'la bouche résignée à une olive qui reçoit une cerise mais pas de préférence je ne cherche pas ni un langage à ma mesure à la mesure d'ici je ne cherche plus' (CC,21). He no longer feels the need to control the representational force of language, concentrating solely on maintaining its flow against the invasion of the void of interiorised consciousness: 'soudain ... ne plus tenir que par le bout des ongles image alpes-tre ou spéléologique à son espèce ... instant atroce c'est ici que les mots ont leur utilité la boue est muette' (CC,31). He still remarks on the falseness of words -- 'fange est trop dire prise est trop dire tout est trop dire' (CC,23), 'ces mots ne sont pas assez faibles' (CC,154) -- but he does not fear them as he used to and recognises their necessity to consciousness: 'une image pas pour les yeux faite avec des mots pas pour les oreilles' (CC,55), 'voir une chose possible la nommer la nommer la voir' (CC,128). Where in L'innommable the image-evoking

tendency of language was antipathetic to the abstract world and antitheses were used to mitigate the power of words, here they have no power -- 'trouver des mots encore alors qu'ils sont tous dépensés' (CC,54) -- and instead of what Professor Coe calls 'the Niagara Falls quality',<sup>1</sup> of the language in L'innommable, the words here can barely cling together in grammatical structures much less meaningful ones: 'quelques vieux mots par-ci par-là les ajouter les uns aux autres faire des phrases' (CC,129, echoed 130 & 133).<sup>2</sup> Against the overpowering inclination towards the void in this novel, all possible forms of contrast are used to energise the word-stream and lend variety to a structure extracted from undistinguished chaos. The dynamics of the prose depend on the opposing tendencies of language to represent and of images to disintegrate. Subject-matter contrasts life above with life underground, intimations of external reality with grotesque physical representations of inner life. Minute calculations of detail induced by the predilection for logic and mathematics appear ludicrous over against the "vast tracts of time" and boundless mud in which they are set, and the arbitrary selection of their points of departure: 'prenons vingt numéros qui se suivent / mais n'importe lesquels n'importe lesquels ça n'a pas d'importance' (CC,145). Oppositions of all kinds are a source of stimulation

<sup>1</sup> Coe, p.82.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the beginning of the later short text Lessness, which simply juxtaposes words and short phrases, then gradually moves towards a certain amount of orthodox syntax, only to collapse into the barely structured language of its beginning -- a process which is repeated throughout the text.

for the creative urge faced with the insignificance of its subject and the unsuitability of its medium.

The opposing themes of movement and stasis, already in L'innommable associated with speech and silence, are developed in Comment c'est to reflect the creative process, alternating as it does between the movement of speech and the immobility of silence: 'soudain ... la voix rien puis soudain quelque chose quelque chose puis soudain rien soudain au loin le silence' (CC,16). This fluctuating movement reveals the ebb and flow of images in the consciousness and it is represented in physical terms by the regular collapse of the voice overcome by the need for air, marked by the refrain "quand ça cesse de haleter" which appears more and more frequently as the novel draws to a close: 'ça halète plus fort de plus en plus animal qui veut de l'air' (CC,154), 'à la fin avant le silence le halètement sans trêve l'animal court d'air' (CC,164).<sup>1</sup> Thus we have a rhythmic stopping and starting of the voice in time as well as a pattern of alternate word-blocks and blank spaces on the printed page, the spatial dimension of the novel. Movement equated with the voice still denotes life, as it did in the earlier novels, since speech is here the mark of human existence, and it is noteworthy that among the 'grands besoins toutes mes grandes catégories d'existence', which to the alienated consciousness can only serve as topics for conversation, still appears 'le besoin d'aller plus

<sup>1</sup> The animal imagery, as in all Beckett's work, diminishes the speaker, encouraging us to see him in this novel as the author does, in the perspective of eternity.



loin' (CC,17). Thus it is only to be expected that the stylised physical movement of the story should assume the same form, emphasised in the chorus of "dix mètres quinze mètres halte". Not only does the speaker picture his own progress as a series of stops and starts, but so is that of the whole procession, 'se faisant par bonds ou saccades' (CC,150-1). Just as silence is an integral part of speech, and speech defines the boundaries of silence,<sup>1</sup> so movement and stasis are inter-dependent: 'à l'image dans sa discontinuité des voyages dont elle est la somme faits d'étapes de haltes et de ces étapes dont le voyage est la somme' (CC,152).<sup>2</sup> The tension of the urge to speak conflicting with the invading silence (or lack of subject-matter) is transposed in the fiction into the incompatible interests of tormentors and victims: 'en tant que bourreaux notre intérêt est de rester tranquilles en tant que victimes il nous engage à partir' (CC,171).

<sup>1</sup> Susan Sontag's remarks in her essay 'The Aesthetics of Silence' are pertinent here: "Silence" never ceases to imply its opposite and to depend on its presence.... Not only does silence exist in a world full of speech and other sounds, but any given silence has its identity as a stretch of time being perforated by sound.... A genuine emptiness, a pure silence are not feasible -- either conceptually or in fact. If only because the artwork exists in a world furnished with many other things, the artist who creates silence or emptiness must produce something dialectical: a full void, an enriching emptiness, a resonating or eloquent silence' (Styles of Radical Will, London 1969, p.11) -- Beckett's dialectics are reductive rather than transcendent because of his merging of the themes of the coincidence of contraries with those of ultimate meaningless and pervasive doubt.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Molloy's 'c'était le seul moyen de progresser, m'arrêter' (Mo,120).

Verbal antitheses become a source of humour here, since language is recognised as incapable of indicating anything beyond itself: 'piqué au cul au lieu de crier il chante quel con ce Pim tout de même confondre cul et aisselle' (CC,83), 'ces mots-là chaque fois qu'ils arrivent nuit jour ombre lumière cette famille-là envie de rire' (CC,134). Thus the old Beckettian themes of the identification of opposites (seen in the moving chain of creatures as 'Z à A oubli divin': CC,97) and the basic sameness or meaninglessness of all things are incorporated in the attitude to language of this latest novel:

une petite perle de soulas désolé tant mieux tant pis ce genre en moins froid à la bonne heure hélas ce genre en moins chaud joie et peine ces deux-là la total de ces deux-là divisé par deux et tiède comme dans le vestibule (CC,52).

Motifs formed of antithetical phrases are scattered throughout the text inter-relating the theme of fundamental meaninglessness with that of total uncertainty -- if all words are at heart the same then there can be no criteria for choosing between them: "oui ou non", "c'est l'un ou l'autre", "plus ou moins", "j'entends dire que oui puis que non" (doubt here being transferred even to the voice), "ça ou autre chose". Doubt is unassailable in this solipsistic world in which the self is an acknowledged fiction: 'une chose qu'on ignore ... on invente mais comment savoir imaginaire réel on ne peut pas ... quelle importance c'est important ça l'était ça c'est magnifique une chose importante' (CC,89). Since speech is unrelated to external reality, it does not really

matter what one says: ' Pim ne peut rien affirmer non nier non on ne peut donc pas parler de souvenirs non mais on peut aussi en parler oui' (CC,119). Thus the anguish which ignorance and uncertainty caused the Unnamable is muted here where the speaker's ambitions are retrenched ('faire celui qui existe ... je sais je sais tant pis on peut en causer ... quelle importance ça ne fait de mal à personne il n'y a personne': CC,71). The leitmotifs of doubt still reappear often enough to remind the reader of the distress they indicated in the earlier novel: "grande confusion", "je ne sais plus", "on ne sait pas", "on ne dit pas", "je peux me tromper", "comment savoir"; but the altered attitude is clear from the distorted version given here of the Unnamable's closing defiance of the void: 'il faut continuer, je vais continuer' (I,262), now twisted into 'on ne peut continuer on continue la même chose' (CC,110).

#### XI. Repetition

Of all Beckett's novels, Comment c'est is the most iterative. Repetition is the most significant literary technique of the book, playing a major part in its architectural and thematic development. Catchphrases emphasise the straitened storyline: 'jambe gauche bras gauche pousse tire ... dix mètres quinze mètres halte' (CC,23), 'dix quinze coups sur le crâne' (CC,89), 'bafouille dix secondes quinze secondes' (CC,159), and the uninspiring narrative circumstances: 'dans la boue brefs mouvements du bas du visage'



(CC,9), 'quand ça cesse de haleter' (CC,9), 'je le dis comme je l'entends le murmure dans la boue' (CC,13), lending a measure of solidity to the images on which the novel is founded and instilling a sense of direction: 'comment c'était comment c'est ... dans l'ordre' (CC,24). Fictional reality is set over against the more authentic pictures in the mind by reiterated variations of 'la vie dans la lumière' opposing 'sur le ventre dans la boue le noir' (CC,12). Successive, desperately sought subject-matters are related: 'on parle du sac', 'on parle de l'ouvre-boîte', 'on parle de mes ongles', 'on parle maintenant d'une procession'.<sup>1</sup> All the recurring phrases and words -- "noir", "boue", "image", "silence", "sac", "lumière", "bribes" -- hammer home the paucity of material and finitude of language. The discontinuity of experience is revealed in the periodic "un temps énorme", "des temps énormes" which, combined with systematic negation and the leitmotifs of doubt and ignorance, form an opposing force undermining that aiming at narrative coherence. As in preceding works, repetition reaches across the boundaries of the novel to embrace Beckett's total oeuvre, pointing to the common origin in a single creative consciousness. The desire of the hero of 'La fin' for 'un crocus jaune' (NTPR,91) is fulfilled here: 'je vois un crocus dans un pot dans une courette au sous-sol un safran' (CC,25) -- illustrating the distortive nature of memory; Molloy's

<sup>1</sup> See CC,13, 41, 66, 150.

and Macmann's crawling prefigures the present speaker's halting journey; Lucky's 'quaquaquaqua' (G,71) is developed into a refrain; the 'coup sur le crâne signifiant ... stop' (CC,79) for Molloy 'signifiait oui' (Mo,24); numerous phrases from L'innommable become leitmotifs in the present text, and both speakers momentarily share a similar, repulsive image of self: cf. 'l'image d'une grande bouche idiote, rouge, lippue, baveuse' (I,212) and 'je suis resté lippu deux grosses lippes faites pour les baisers j' imagine rouge écarlate j' imagine' (CC,54), both also long for the projected Part Four of Comment c'est: 'il viendra se coucher sur moi, à côté de moi, mon dévoué bourreau' (I,192).

Repetition served all these functions to a greater or lesser extent in the earlier novels also, but in Comment c'est it assumes such proportions that new functions emerge. Firstly there is the circular impression of the ubiquitous phrases, appearing in all contexts with the components varying and merging, which projects the image of language as a closed system: 'des bribes ... cette vieille vie même mots même bribes des millions de fois' (CC,160-1) -- the creative consciousness is thus shown to be defined and limited by its language. Then there is the peculiar, incantatory effect of endless reiteration which lends an hallucinatory quality to the imagery; this is heightened by the recurring motifs of illusion: 'vieux songes', 'on me donne un rêve', 'ces bribes tout bas d'une fantaisie', 'ce vieux rêve', 'l'impression

ou bien illusion', 'rêvé au grand Kram Neuf', 'voyages imaginaires frères imaginaires',<sup>1</sup> culminating in the old schizophrenic fantasy: 'quelqu'un dans un autre monde oui dont je serais comme le rêve oui qu'il rêverait tout le temps' (CC,175).<sup>2</sup> The cumulative force of frequently reappearing elements gives the prose an obsessive ring consonant with intense self-consciousness. The symphonic echoes and variations at all levels of reality lend a musicality to the prose which brings it far into the realm of poetry. Finally, the familiar refrains gradually assume a choric nature, explaining and commenting on the course of the narrative and its creative process, expressing the pleasure of fictional existence -- "c'était de bons moments", "un bon moment ce sont de bons moments" -- and giving vent to insistent disquiet -- "quelque chose là qui ne va pas" -- lest the repetitive, rhythmic prose lull the reader's scepticism. The suggestion of a chorus, of course, refers right back to Watt's 'other voices ... murmuring things unintelligible, in his ear' (W,27), and gives a new dimension to the concept of the voice as 'cette voix anonyme se disant quaquà à nous tous d'abord dehors ... puis en nous' (CC,168); 'je l'entends en moi qui fut dehors quaquà notre voix à tous' (CC,121).

## XII. Conclusion

Since the hope of acquiring an absolute self has been abandoned after the experience of creating L'innommable, the question

<sup>1</sup> See CC,9, 17, 24, 47, 89, 101, 139.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Malone's feeling 'que je suis dans une tête ... mais de là à dire que c'est ma tête à moi, non, ça jamais' (MM,87).



of narrative viewpoint in Comment c'est causes less distress while remaining problematical: 'je ne dis plus qui parle ça ne se dit plus' (CC,25). No attempt is made here to identify the vantage point; the "I" is merely expedient not definitive: 'dire moi pour dire quelque chose' (CC,42). The recording "I" is genuinely anonymous and the images of self are fictional, so that when the voice says 'je me vois à plat ventre' (CC,11), or 'je me donne dans les seize ans' (CC,35), three different viewpoints are designated -- the recorder and two images of self, present and past<sup>1</sup> -- but the kernel of self which the Unnamable tried so hard to locate is uninvolved. The recording consciousness is set outside the fictional selves, watching the passage of their images: 'd'où me vient ce cinéma' (CC,39), and it is this which permits a measure of superiority to the "je" designating it -- allowing, for instance, the humorous confusions: 'je voyage avec mon sac ... vers Pim sans le savoir' (CC,25), or 'à l'instant où Pim me quitte... Ben quitte l'autre et vient vers moi je me place à mon point de vue' (CC,137). The implied author hounded by bibliographers is on a par with Malone and his visitors: 'ni de visiteurs dans ma vie cette fois ... accourus de toutes parts ... / des vieux comme ils m'avaient fait sauter sur leurs genoux ... / d'autres ne sachant rien de mes débuts hormis ce qu'ils avaient pu glaner par oui-dire et dans les archives / ... /

<sup>1</sup> This split is reflected in the different temporal planes: the past/present/future scheme of the fictional selves, and the instantaneous present of the creative consciousness.

vivre donc sans visiteurs présente rédaction sans autres histoires que les miennes' (CC,15-6); the Dublin Ballast Office (CC,54) takes its place beside the crucus of 'La fin'; Molloy's past, 'du temps où je rasais encore les murs' (CC,46), is related to the present of the implied author: 'alors...je hurlais au secours ... / comme lorsque pris exceptionnellement de boisson ... m'obstinant à vouloir sortir de l'ascenseur je me prends le pied entre palier et cage' (CC,46); and all are subordinated to an unidentified recording "I".<sup>1</sup> The reader accustomed to associating himself with the first-person narrator is faced with a predicament in a novel where the first person is stated to be a mere manner of speaking disguising the lack of a unified centre of consciousness. The final barrier between him and the creative process is thus removed, so that he identifies no longer with a person but with an act from which no irony protects him. Irony here is directed towards the subterfuges used to permit speech after it became impossible for the Unnamable. Now the same problems are avoided but not solved;<sup>2</sup> anxiety is subdued but never wholly overcome: 'ça ne peut plus durer ça dure je suis plus calme on croit qu'on est calme et on ne l'est pas au plus bas et on est au bord' (CC,25). The reader is thus kept at a distance from

<sup>1</sup> It is this anonymous recorder that the self of Lessness and the vision of mankind contained in Le dépeupleur are subjected to with the same degree of impersonality.

<sup>2</sup> As the narrator of the later text Assez puts it, 'On voit des questions sans se les poser' (TM,34).

the product; he merges with the artistic mode of being while disavowing the work of art.

The problem of narrative responsibility hovers around the margins of the novel without ever being openly confronted; 'd'où me vient ce cinéma' (CC,39) is a question which remains unanswered. Logic assumes that the disjointed, confused life depicted in the novel should make sense, that there is a whole of which man only perceives part -- hence the leitmotif "des bribes" associated with the word-flow, culminating in the image of complete incoherence: 'ces bribes d'autres bribes d'un antique cafouillis' (CC,162).<sup>1</sup> But even if the fault is man's, the speaker cannot tell which aspect of the disintegrated self bears the blame for faulty perception, the voice, the listener, or the creator: 'ma vie ... mal dite mal entendue mal retrouvée' (CC,24), 'tant de mots tant de perdus ... ou bien aucun' (CC,116), 'une voix parle puis se tait quelques bribes puis plus rien ... tout discontinu' (CC,152). As listener and scribe, he cannot control the creative act: 'question si j'en use beaucoup [de paroles] on ne dit pas ou je n'entends pas' (CC,22). He is adamant in disclaiming responsibility, as his repeated "je cite", "je le dis comme je l'entends" emphasise. Where the Unnamable insisted

<sup>1</sup> Comment c'est, as 'bribes d'un conte énorme' (CC,32), is thus the reverse of Mallarmé's Livre, cipher of the world. If there is an order in the world, the twentieth-century artist cannot perceive it.

The theme of the chaos of experience, with its motifs of "bribes", "cafouillis", "extraits", "échantillons", runs through Beckett's work as far back as Sam's failure to make Watt's tale appear coherent.



that the voice was not his (although admitting in the end that this was because there was no "him" to own it: 'il n'y a que moi, non plus, moi non plus, j'ai cherché partout, il doit y avoir quelqu'un, cette voix doit appartenir à quelqu'un': I, 249), the present speaker tries to avoid the issue: 'des mots pas les miens ... ça non ça ne se dit pas c'est la différence' (CC, 26). He attempts to establish a relationship with the voice by repeating that it is 'en moi qui fut dehors' (CC, 58), but, of course, we know that the "moi" is non-referential, so that the phrase tells us nothing. The ambiguity of narrative responsibility is never fully disguised and the autonomy of language is disclosed towards the end: 'cette voix anonyme ... d'abord dehors ... puis en nous' (CC, 168). In the last pages this is clearly revealed as a major contributor to the disquiet underlying the whole literary creation, one of the admissions leading to the destruction of the novel's foundations being the desire for 'une formulation qui ... me rendrait moi seul responsable de cet inqualifiable murmure' (CC, 173).

If the inspiration of L'innommable had its origin in the clash between the undefinability of self and the representational tendency of language, Comment c'est would seem to arise from contemplation of the disparity between man and the universe, between time and eternity. It is the sense of the futility of man's life ending inevitably in death which determines the ethos of Beckett's work, and the structure of Comment c'est is determined by the artist's despair, since the total negation at the

end of the book makes it meaningless. The key to the whole novel, structure, tone and themes lies in its view of man:

'je me suis rappelé mes jours la largeur de la main ma vie comme un rien l'homme debout qu'un souffle' (CC,99).<sup>1</sup> Where the Unnamable tried to set the mind on the same plane as eternity by attempting to make the language of consciousness into 'mots blancs' (I,248), the artist here approaches the void of atemporality by progressively emptying the consciousness of images. The book is a record of his imaginative confrontation with death or eternity -- as was the writing of Malone meurt, although the path of approach was different. In his essay on Proust Beckett talks of 'the work of art ... neither created nor chosen, but discovered, uncovered, excavated, pre-existing within the artist, a law of his nature' (Pr,84). He discusses Proust's distinction between artist and artisan, the one as discoverer, the other as translator.<sup>2</sup> Art for Beckett is therefore a contemplative not

<sup>1</sup> Michael Robinson holds that 'the despair of the artist who wrote the trilogy is conspicuous by its absence' (The Long Sonata of the Dead, p.224), but surely it is even more evident now. The Unnamable was prepared to battle on. Resignation is the product of despair here and the theme of the insignificance of man and the vanity of his struggle are sharpened, not blunted, by what Mr. Robinson calls 'the artisan's delight in [the book's] architecture'(p.224).

<sup>2</sup> This dichotomous view of the artistic process gives an external explanation for the novel's dual time-scheme and ambiguous viewpoint.

For Michael Robinson, Comment c'est reveals 'the ascendancy of the artisan', while 'The Unnamable was still created by the artist' (p.223); but this somewhat distorts Beckett's meaning, since artist and artisan are clearly two sides of the same coin. Similarly Eugene Webb holds that the book 'treats thematic content primarily as a vehicle for form' (Webb,155); but, as we found when discussing the use of repetition, here meaning and form are inextricable.

a didactic process. Comment c'est is the result of the artist's probing of self in the shadow of eternity; it is the imaginative product of a law, not only of the individual artist's nature, but of the nature of all mankind -- all life is reduced to incoherence by the inevitability of death.

In Comment c'est the artisan has modified his tool in order to bring his "translation" closer to the artist's finding; he has modified the structure of his language. The discontinuity of experience is mirrored in the lack of a syntax indicating explicit relationship; the emptying out of the consciousness as it approaches the moment of obliteration brings about extensive repetition, indicating the progressive restriction of accessible imagery as the imagination envisages death: 'tout ça ... à seule fin que soit possible blanc sur blanc' (CC,163).<sup>1</sup> As David Lodge emphasises in his essay on 'Ping', this new language has a syntax, based mainly on word-order;<sup>2</sup> it thus relates as clearly to Beckett's definition of impressionism ('[the] non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception, before they have been distorted into intelligibility': Pr,86) as did Molloy's disjointed vision of the world. Language here reflects the images and movements of consciousness before distortion into intelligibility; it imaginatively reproduces consciousness rather than expressing it, since "expression", with its

<sup>1</sup> Beckett's next prose work Imagination morte imaginez attempts to transcend this moment by turning away from the self (as does the most recently published work Le dépeupleur): 'Mais non, la vie s'achève et non, il n'y a rien ailleurs, et plus question de retrouver ce point blanc perdu dans la blancheur' (TM,57).

<sup>2</sup> 'Some Ping Understood', Encounter, XXX,2 (February 1968), pp.85-89.



associations with literature and coherence, necessarily deforms. Where the prose writings up to the Textes pour rien tried to approach the Idea of death by emptying the language, from Comment c'est on they approach it through the systematic draining of consciousness, so that the later writings become more and more repetitious and materially restricted. Lessness, the author's most recent confrontation of the self with death, finds the artist as he is at the close of Comment c'est --- alone in the face of eternity; but the gap has closed a little and there is just one more step to make to cross the frontiers of silence: 'Little body ash grey locked rigid heart beating face to endlessness', 'In the sand no hold one step more in the endlessness he will make it' (L, 8 & 9-10).

CHAPTER VIII

C O N C L U S I O N

The principal aim of this thesis has been to seek out a way of approaching Beckett's novels to enable their acceptance on their own terms, neither as philosophical, sociological nor psychological treatises, but as art products. Beckett is too sophisticated an artist not to be aware of the metaphysical substructure, the social implications or Freudian aspects of his art;<sup>1</sup> and indeed his particular genius lies in his ability to exploit and synthesise all these elements in his artistic creations. The narrator of 'L'expulsé' exclaimed about his comic efforts to explain adult physical and mental disabilities in terms of childhood incontinence: 'Pauvres solutions de jeunesse, qui n'expliquent rien. On n'a donc pas à se gêner. Ratiocinons sans crainte, le brouillard tiendra bon' (NTPR, 22), and we should bear our caveat in mind to avoid reductive exegesis.

<sup>1</sup> Edith Kern, in Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett, seeks to elucidate Beckett's metaphysics.

The theme of social alienation, examined in Fletcher, Novels, leads Patrick Murray to declare: 'Whatever may be thought of Beckett's refusal to involve himself in social and political issues, or to explore, as do almost all the major novelists, the moral problems of his day, there is no doubt that the rejection of individual relationships makes his work less interesting and ultimately less significant for a great number of readers' (The Tragic Comedian: A Study of Samuel Beckett : Cork 1970) p.91.

André Marissel takes a Freudian approach to the psychological facet of the novels, particularly relating it to the author; see Samuel Beckett (Paris 1963).



Even the speaker of Comment c'est was not beyond a gibe at philosophy: 'le chien suit ... rien à voir avec nous il a eu la même idée au même instant du Malebranche en moins rose les lettres que j'avais' (CC,37). Susan Sontag reminds us that 'A work of art is a thing in the world, not just a text or commentary on the world'.<sup>1</sup> And Beckett himself draws attention to this aspect of art in his essay on Joyce, when he says of Finnegans Wake that 'it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something; it is that something itself'.<sup>2</sup>

The artist's drive to create is, for Beckett, motivated by the need to relieve his 'obscures tensions internes';<sup>3</sup> art is a means of coping with life. It is not expression but a voyage of discovery, a quest: 'Art has always been this -- pure interrogation', 'The time is perhaps not altogether too green for the vile suggestion that art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear'.<sup>4</sup> Far from using his art as a replacement for life as did Joyce, or as an escape from it as did Flaubert, Beckett, through the creation of imaginative literature, directly confronts what seem to him the most difficult concepts to which consideration of life gives

<sup>1</sup> 'On Style', Against Interpretation, p.24.

<sup>2</sup> Dante... Bruno. Vico.. Joyce', p.14.

<sup>3</sup> 'La peinture des Van Velde', p.351. Beckett refers to the artist and his art (in an unpublished, undated manuscript, entitled 'Les deux besoins', also on the art of the Van Velde brothers, to which Lawrence Harvey had access: Harvey, p.428) as 'enfer d'irraison d'où s'élève le cri à blanc, la série de questions pures, l'oeuvre'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Denis Devlin', pp.289 & 293.

rise -- being, death and eternity. Erich Heller, in 'The Realistic Fallacy', says that 'the confused history of man is largely the history of conflicting senses of reality',<sup>1</sup> and he divides realism in literature into artists who understand the real as belonging to the external world and those for whom it belongs to human inwardness. Beckett clearly has his place in the second of these traditions (witness his scorn for "social reality" both in his essay on Proust and in the Devlin review). His principal innovation as a realist, however, is the manner in which he approaches the real as he understands it. His literary aim is neither to imitate nor to dominate reality, but to reach for it out of human incompetence: 'The kind of work I do is one in which I'm not master of my material ... I'm working with impotence, ignorance'.<sup>2</sup> Kafka reflects a shifting, ungraspable reality, but this in itself implies a statement about the real -- that it is shifting; Beckett goes one step further, since he deals with the inability to know anything about the nature of reality -- his medium for achieving understanding, language, being incompatible with his subject, Being. Up to his most recent work, his art is concerned with delving to the heart of reality: 'Never but this changelessness dream the passing hour' (L,8).<sup>3</sup> However, what must be realised, to prevent us from

<sup>1</sup> The Artist's Journey into the Interior, and Other Essays (1966), p.89.

<sup>2</sup> Israel Shenker, 'Moody Man of Letters', p.3.

<sup>3</sup> Although Le dépeupleur was published after Sans (the French version of Lessness), Beckett confirms that, apart from a "coda" added in 1970 (pp.53-55), it was in fact written in 1966. Lessness is thus his most recently written work.

passing beyond the work of art to some external meaning or goal, is that, for Beckett, it is the creative act, the imaginative probe, that permits the only intimations of Being accessible to man; hence the theme of the equation of writing with living in his novels. He thus breaks down the barriers between art and life. If, as he said to Lawrence Harvey, he feels that the new and exciting aspect of contemporary work 'is the attempt to let Being into art',<sup>1</sup> it must also be understood that it is through his art that he extends the range of consciousness to penetrate the surfaces of self and apprehend Being. This is not "Art for Art's sake", but art for life's sake. Already in his essay on Proust, long before his major artistic achievements, Beckett is speaking of 'the infinite futility -- for the artist -- of all that is not art' (Pr,69). The artistic experience becomes, for Beckett, a painful intensification of one facet of consciousness so that the rest is blurred -- which in part explains his sense of unreality of the external world. Malone's 'C'est ma vie, ce cahier ... j'ai mis du temps à m'y résigner' (MM,191) hints at regret for all that the author's obsessive quest for essences has cost him in terms of breadth of the experience of living.

For Beckett, then, art is essentially private, since it is introspective, an inward-thrusting imaginative act. This has always been his concept of art and the work of artists he has

<sup>1</sup> Harvey, p.435; quoted from conversations with Beckett 1961-62.



admired and defended has been consistently approached from this point of view: Proust in 1931 -- 'The artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction. And art is the apotheosis of solitude' (Pr,64); Devlin in 1938 -- 'With himself on behalf of himself. With his selves on behalf of his selves. Tour d'ébène';<sup>1</sup> the Van Velde brothers in 1945 -- 'cette peinture solitaire, solitaire de la solitude qui se couvre la tête';<sup>2</sup> Jack Yeats in 1954 -- 'ce qu'a d'incomparable cette grande oeuvre solitaire est son insistance à renvoyer au plus secret de l'esprit qui la soulève et à ne se laisser éclairer qu'au jour de celui-ci'.<sup>3</sup> Art is secretive and belongs exclusively to the inner world. In Proust Beckett spoke of artistic vision in terms of 'the object ... perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family ... independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance' (Pr,22-3), the action of uncreative vision 'being precisely to hide the essence -- the Idea -- of the object in the haze of conception' (Pr,23). By the time he wrote about the Van Velde brothers' work, this experience was conceived of as belonging solely to the inner world: 'La chose immobile dans le vide, voilà enfin la chose visible, l'objet pur ... La boîte crânienne a le monopole de cet article'.<sup>4</sup> (the influence of

<sup>1</sup> 'Denis Devlin', p.289.

<sup>2</sup> 'La peinture des Van Velde', p.356.

<sup>3</sup> 'Hommage à Jack B. Yeats', Lettres Nouvelles, no.14 (avril 1954), p.619.

<sup>4</sup> 'La peinture des Van Velde', p.352.

Schopenhauer is still unmistakable). "Being" can thus be seen as the essence or Idea of man, and the artist can only approach it imaginatively through introspection. The artistic experience is therefore at best one step removed from its audience. Thence Beckett's distinction between artist and artisan, the artist discovering the work of art pre-existing within himself, while 'the artisan translates it' (Pr, 84).<sup>1</sup> J. R. Harvey charges Beckett with intellectual dishonesty, claiming that he expresses well the inability to express, and complains of a 'confusion in his mind as to what art is'.<sup>2</sup> Despite the little Beckett has said about art, the few quotations given here do not support such a charge. His concept of art is paradoxical, yes, but not confused. It is surely the conflict between Beckett's view of art as "interrogation", or exploration, and Mr. Harvey's as expression, the private versus the public role, that causes the trouble. Where Mr. Harvey talks of the artist expressing, Beckett would refer to the artisan translating.

The conflict between the public and private roles of art is one of the most problematical features of Beckett's work.

<sup>1</sup> R. G. Collingwood, The Principles of Art (1938), reads as an extension of this attitude when he differentiates between the work of art as it exists in the artist's head and 'The second thing, the bodily and perceptible thing, ... only incidental to the first, ..., a work of art, not in its own right, but only because of the relation in which it stands to the "mental" thing or ... aesthetic experience which is the "work of art proper"' (p.37). Such a view would clarify Beckett's ironic attitude to the novels as product of his art—as opposed to his acceptance of the validity of the creative act—and his easy dismissal of the results of his artistic activity: 'rien à tout jamais que mots morts' (NTPR, 214).

<sup>2</sup> 'La vieille voix fable', Cambridge Quarterly I, 4 (Autumn 1966), p.393.

From his own point of view the public aspect is not only secondary but relatively insignificant if not highly dubious. In the unpublished essay 'Les deux besoins' he allows that the artist may 'si l'on veut, finir par faire voir aux quelques-uns pour qui il existe';<sup>1</sup> but, given the importance of the theme of the difficulties of communication in his own work, such a possibility must seem remote to him. On the other hand, it is, of course, to the extent that we can share his vision that his art succeeds, from our point of view. But this criterion for the success of the art product is not really the concern of the artist -- who considers his art in different terms -- only that of his audience. Georg Lukács complains that "modernism", among whose literary exponents he includes Beckett, 'leads not only to the destruction of traditional literary forms; it leads to the destruction of literature as such', it is 'the negation of art'.<sup>2</sup> He rejects Beckett because of the lack of potentiality in his world -- it cannot admit progress or meaning -- and because his vision attenuates objective reality. Such a rejection is the natural outcome of the view of man as a component of society -- society being the entity; when Lukács specifies man as the focal point of content in the novel, it is to the social animal that he refers. He is therefore concerned with different aspects of reality and different aspects of man than those which preoccupy Beckett. Diana Spearman, in her study of the relationship

<sup>1</sup> Harvey, p.431.

<sup>2</sup> The Meaning of Contemporary Realism (1962), pp.45 & 46.



between the writer and society, comes to the conclusion that the artistic experience starts from 'the solitary and not from the social aspects of a living creature's experience';<sup>1</sup> and she defines the basic impulse to create as biological not social -- a diagnosis which throws light on Beckett's reference to "obscurer tensions internes" as the motor of his creative urge. Miss Spearman decides that although social and cultural forces control and direct expression (Beckett would say translation) of the non-social artistic tendency, they do not create it. Beckett's subject is man, his medium language and his method of approach artistic or imaginative. Social and cultural forces have directed him to the novel as a vehicle for his exploration of the human condition (Beckett has always considered himself primarily as a novelist), but it does not necessarily follow that his vision of man must be set in the perspective of society.

Basically it is the privacy of Beckett's art that makes his use of the term "novel" to designate his longer prose fiction works unacceptable to many, since the role of the novel is generally considered to be essentially public. Plot and character development tend to be regarded as the criteria on which to judge a novel's excellence, and both depend on the depiction of man as acting within society. Beckett's novels, as we have seen, speedily dispense with both concepts. Murphy could almost have

<sup>1</sup> Diana Spearman, The Novel and Society (1966), p.228.

been written as a forestalling of Robert Liddell's view that 'Probably novelists most often work with the full and naïve conviction that the whole meaning of a novel lies in the plot and characters; and probably those who no longer hold this full and naïve conviction would do well to act as if they did'.<sup>1</sup> Clearly those for whom Jane Austen or Balzac are central in the tradition of the novel, because of their capacity to set their characters in a structured and totally possessed society, are bound to exclude Beckett. He was not by any means the first to attack the social function of literature -- Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Sartre (in La nausée), among others, had already penetrated the consciousness of the individual and set him over against the world. The boundaries of the novel have had to be extended in order to include some of the major prose fiction writers of the twentieth century. The charge of attenuating outer reality would apply equally well to Virginia Woolf's The Waves. As has been pointed out, the inwardness of Beckett's world is due to his particular understanding of the real. To this extent, then, he meets Wellek's and Warren's requirement that the novel's world should be 'recognizable as overlapping the empirical world but distinct in its self-coherent intelligibility'.<sup>2</sup> Only Beckett's world lacks the intelligibility; he presents its reality as inward but unknowable; he explores it from a base

<sup>1</sup> A Treatise on the Novel (1947), p.29.

<sup>2</sup> René Wellek and Austen Warren, Theory of Literature, p.214.

of ignorance. The framework in which he sets man is accordingly hazy and insecure, so that the reader too is forced to strive for solidity from a position of constant uncertainty. The only certain reality the novels offer is the reality of the voice, of the anonymous presence of man -- Beckett would call it Being. And it is the more real by contrast with the uncertain reality of its containing world. The material solidity of an object-laden world like Joyce's would totally submerge it. Therefore, if the novel is to deal with a concept as tenuous yet fundamental as Being, Beckett has provided a most suitable framework.

As novels, Beckett's works are more controversial in their isolation of man from man, since human relationships are still central to the idea of a novel.<sup>1</sup> Even those for whom, in Leonard B. Meyer's words, 'the renaissance is over', and 'man is no longer the measure of all things, the center of the universe',<sup>2</sup> still allow him the comfort of a brother. But if Beckett's art depicts man in isolation, it is equally concerned with his intense desire for love; while the Van Veldes' art deals with 'la solitude qui se couvre la tête', Beckett also sees it as 'la solitude qui tend les bras'.<sup>3</sup> It is impossible to overlook the dominance and overwhelming immediacy of the theme of loneliness in Beckett's

<sup>1</sup> See Elizabeth Drew, Life and Art in the Novel (Massachusetts 1962), for whom 'the presentation of personal relationships is the central interest of the novel' (pp.9-10); or Dorothy Van Ghent, The English Novel: Form and Function (New York 1953), who locates the subject of novels in 'human relationships in which are shown the direction of men's souls' (p.3).

<sup>2</sup> 'The End of the Renaissance', Innovations, ed. Bernard Bergonzi (1968), pp.64-65.

<sup>3</sup> 'La peinture des Van Velde', p.356.



novels. Only Murphy does not feel the need for friendship<sup>1</sup>-- perhaps because, in theory at least, it is still possible. The difficulty of human contact, amusingly objectivised as incompatible tastes in weather, is behind the problems Watt and Sam have to overcome in order to meet; but the anguish of solitude is not far beneath the surface: 'to us in our windowlessness, in our bloodheat, in our hush, to us who could not hear the wind nor see the sun, what call could come, from the kind of weather we liked, but a call so faint as to mock acceptance, mock refusal?' (W,150). The deeper the novels penetrate into the inner world, the more impossible relationships with their fellow men become for the protagonists and the sharper the pain of loneliness. Malone creates his sub-fictions partly in response to the need for companionship, and even the Unnamable greets the impossible dream of a companion with ecstasy: 'Ça me ferait un semblable, ce serait épatant, mon premier semblable' (I,186). The form of Comment c'est can be seen as directly inspired by the need for friendship, since it is built around the era of the couple, and the speaker's relationship with his sack, like a child with its teddy-bear, tells its own tale of loneliness and despair: 'le sac ... je le prends dans mes bras lui parle y fourre ma tête y frotte ma joue y pose ma bouche m'en détourne avec humeur m'y presse de nouveau lui dis toi toi' (CC,21). Clearly, although these novels do not depict human relationships as such, they discern the need for friendship and contact with other men

<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless he seeks to join the brotherhood of the insane.

at the heart of human nature, and loneliness is surely one of the "inner tensions" behind the artist's creative urge -- "la solitude qui tend les bras". Balzac and Beckett still have in common the human condition as the basis of their art, only the first sets about organising it from a position of power where the second explores it from a position of weakness; the first draws his material from observation of his fellow man and the second seeks only within himself since that is the only world accessible to him. When we remember that Beckett's apprehension of Being is achieved through his artistic activity, and is totally dependent on it, the self-consciousness of his art is seen to be inevitable. The essence of self which the imaginative act enables him to approach is the artist's self. The creative process and Being merge. The vision of man which the reader identifies with in Beckett's novels is indeed nihilistic, but it is highly sophisticated, questioning all things, even its own mode of being, and inducing a state of intense awareness. Basically Beckett's art has to do neither with Truth nor Beauty but with consciousness.

The dichotomous form in which Beckett casts his novels' world is his method of translating the split between the public and the private, the outer and inner worlds, life on the surface and life underground. In conversations with Lawrence Harvey, he discussed the subject frequently:

An image Beckett used repeatedly to express his sense of the unreality of life on the surface was "existence by proxy." Very often one is unable to take a single step without feeling that someone else is taking the step. Going through the motions, "being absent," are common experiences....

Beckett spoke also of the attempt to find this lost self in images of getting down, getting below the surface, concentrating, listening, getting your ear down so you can hear the infinitesimal murmur. There is a gray struggle, a groping in the dark for a shadow. On another occasion he said the encounter was like meeting oneself, like approaching home.<sup>1</sup>

So we have a clear indication of the significance of such forms in his art -- the voices, the silence, the searching, the exclusion from light, the pseudo-selves and ever-retreating self. If suggested only by the choice of the little world of the mind in Murphy, these forms dominate increasingly in the novels to become the very stuff of Comment c'est. Beckett's search for the core of selfhood is governed by "an unconquerable intuition that being is so unlike what one is standing up," an intuition of "a presence, embryonic, undeveloped, of a self that might have been but never got born, an être manqué."<sup>2</sup> From these phrases, it is clear that the concentration and progressive restriction of the novels' material is the formal concretion of an artistic vision focused ever more exclusively on the reality of the inner world whose frontiers are delineated by the opposing unreality of the external world. As silence exists only in relation to speech, so the void of Being found beneath the the surfaces of the mind can only be implied by opposition to

<sup>1</sup> Harvey, p. 247.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey, p. 247.



the accidentals of surfaces. The ineffable void of reality is hidden beneath the appearances of unreality. In an unpublished letter to a German friend, Axel Kaun, written in 1937, Beckett spoke of the need to erode language 'until that which lurks behind it ... begins to trickle through'.<sup>1</sup> His whole effort in speech is concentrated on implying the unspoken;<sup>2</sup> to Axel Kaun he spoke of a 'vertiginous path of sounds connecting unfathomable abysses of silence',<sup>3</sup> -- a splendid, impressionistic description of the novel Comment c'est written twenty-three years later. Words belong to surfaces and the heart of Being is engulfed in silence. Thus Beckett said to Lawrence E. Harvey 'Insofar as one is, there is no material'.<sup>4</sup> It is in this context that we must understand his insistence on the necessity of failure in art: 'to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail ... failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion'.<sup>5</sup>

It is the tension arising from its chosen domain of failure that makes the experience of Beckett's art such a painful one. For him art is 'the need to need ... the art that condenses as inverted spiral of need ... whose end is its own end in the end and source of need',<sup>6</sup> -- we are reminded of Wylie's terse comment on life: 'The horse leech's daughter is a closed system. Her

<sup>1</sup> Harvey, p.434.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Beckett's praise of Devlin for his 'extraordinary evocation of the unsaid by the said' ('Denis Devlin', p.293).

<sup>3</sup> Harvey, p.434.

<sup>4</sup> Harvey, p.249.

<sup>5</sup> 'Three Dialogues', p.125.

<sup>6</sup> 'Denis Devlin', p.290.

quantum of wantum cannot vary' (M,43), again hinting at the connection between Beckett's art and his vision of life. The clash between need, in its double sense of the need to create and the need to know, and the conviction of inevitable failure, the Nietzschean understanding that truth is the absence of Truth, lies at the root of the 'suffering of being' (Pr,20) of which Beckett is so acutely aware. The theme of need runs through his critical writings: incorporated in the title 'Les deux besoins' for the Van Veldes' art, 'cette violence de besoin'<sup>1</sup> for Yeats's, and for Denis Devlin's 'Its own terms, that is terms of need, not of opinion, still less of faction'.<sup>2</sup> And, of course, the double need to create and to know is the mainspring of the novels, as the need to need is the condition of Beckett's art -- a fine point clarified by the Unnamable: 'l'impossibilité de parler, l'impossibilité de me taire, et la solitude ... avec ça je me suis débrouillé' (I,224). 'I write because I have to', Beckett said to Lawrence Harvey, 'What do you do when "I can't" meets "I must"?'<sup>3</sup> -- a question answered in L'innommable: 'je ne peux pas continuer, il faut continuer, je vais donc continuer' (I,261).

Murphy is still a comedy because the conflict between need and inevitable failure is not yet out in the open; the deepest

<sup>1</sup> 'Hommage à Jack B. Yeats', p.619.

<sup>2</sup> 'Denis Devlin', p.289.

<sup>3</sup> Harvey, p.249.

level of the mind penetrated in the work, the third zone, is still expressible as 'a flux of forms' (M,79), and the expressive power of language has not yet been subjected to full interrogation (verbal pyrotechnics are quite acceptable). The 'consternation behind the form'<sup>1</sup> in Watt, of which Beckett spoke, arises because the strain is beginning to make itself felt, language and Mr. Knott fail to relate. But the tension is associated more with Watt than the narrator, and with Mr. Hackett not at all, so that, although the novel is undermined by a certain uneasiness, its impact is still largely comic. It is with Molloy that the real anxiety makes itself felt, since the "hypothetical imperative" opposed by a loss of faith in language is directly related to the narrator, making every word of the narrative a product of tension. Here Beckett's work enters the era of self-conscious narration, described by Professor Heller as 'the stage where every act of creation is inseparable from the critique of its medium, and every work, intensely reflecting upon itself, looks like the embodied doubt of its own possibility'.<sup>2</sup> As the novels probe deeper and deeper beneath the surface of the mind, speech becomes an increasingly unsuitable tool for exploration, tension heightens, and the experience of suffering and bewilderment, for Beckett the essence of the human condition, becomes

<sup>1</sup> Israel Shenker, 'Moody Man of Letters', p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> 'Wittgenstein and Nietzsche', The Artist's Journey into the Interior, p.226. Nietzsche's relevance to Beckett is evident in Heller's description of a sketch of his on 'The Last Philosopher': 'Having lost faith in a communicable world, he is imprisoned within his own self-consciousness. Nothing speaks to him any more -- except his own speech; and, deprived of any authority from a divinely ordered universe, it is only about his speech that his speech can speak with a measure of philosophical assurance' (p.226).



more immediate. It is the emergence of unfulfillable need as the driving force of the narratives that transforms Beckett's work from skilful and amusing literary pieces into an agonising vision of the human condition.

The tension arising from the clash between the creative urge and the paralysis of total scepticism materialises in the novels into a system of thematic and architectural contrasts on which their structure depends. The language is energised by principles of retraction, negation and opposition, and it thrives on ambivalence, paradox and antithesis. Themes oscillate between conflicting motifs: light and darkness, solidity and flux, concrete and abstract, movement and stasis, appearances and reality. The confrontation of macrocosm and microcosm, temporal and atemporal, death and immortality, search for and flight from self, speech and silence, written word and blank space, and above all the intense strain of the inner void against surface accidentals, form the basis of the particular dialectics of Beckett's prose and the delicate balance of his narrative constructions. The novels thus achieve that 'intimate fusion of texture and structure' which Melvin J. Friedman associates with music and counts as the main achievement of stream-of-consciousness practitioners.<sup>1</sup> The aesthetic principle whereby the confrontation of opposites is the perfect means of saying nothing, or creating a Nothing, is supported by the dualism on which the novels' philosophical

<sup>1</sup> Stream of Consciousness: A Study of Literary Method (New Haven 1955), p.24.

sub-structure is founded. Then, of course, the psychological aspects suggesting a schizophrenic tendency echo the dualism:<sup>1</sup> the sense of "existence by proxy" and disintegration of the personality, the desire for human contact over against utter loneliness and alienation from mankind, the ambivalent love/hate attitude to women and indeed to life itself -- the foetus motif which runs through the novels is the perfect schizophrenic image in that it not only reveals nostalgia for the womb but indicates man's inability to cope with life and his incomprehension of it. The social implications are the natural outcome of the philosophical and psychological attitudes since, paradoxically, it is man's sense of isolation and non-belonging which guarantees his place among humanity: 'nous sommes quatre à nous ignorer un million à nous ignorer les uns les autres et chacun soi', 'alors qu'on a sa vie et qu'on l'a eue les grands voyages et la compagnie de ses semblables perdus et fuis' (CC, 149 & 155). Thus we see that not only texture and structure but all aspects of Beckett's art fit together with the inevitability that once was the hallmark of a good plot. Beckett's man is a philosophical animal, concerned with what he really is; his life is portrayed as protracted need in consciousness of inevitable frustration -- the need to mean in the face of death, to know in the absence of Truth, to love despite isolation, to speak where no suitable language is available, to exist in the world where the only reality is a void

<sup>1</sup> G. C. Barnard, Samuel Beckett A New Approach, examines Beckett's work as the product of schizophrenic vision, but he fails to credit Beckett with the awareness of psychological implications which the author in fact exploits so brilliantly.

at the heart of self. This is the human being on which the novels base their existence, producing an art of tensions, a magnificent synthesis of the contradictions inherent in the human condition.

The aesthetic thrill of the novels as art products is largely due to the achievement of this synthesis. Coherence depends on the system of contrasts on which the novels are built. It is therefore to be found on the aesthetic level only and does not belong to the social level, which would lead to a plot, the psychological level, producing definitive characterisation, or the philosophical level, which would imply an ordered universe. Coherence on any level except the aesthetic is anathema to this art dedicated to the formulation of chaos. The traditional views of form as container of meaning and of art as expression, referred to by Beckett as 'the need that in its haste to be abolished cannot pause to be stated', 'Davus and the morbid dread of sphinxes, solution clapped on problem like a snuffer on a candle',<sup>1</sup> are inimical to appreciation of his work. Harold Rosenberg speaks of modern art as being at war with its own nature and declares that 'the subversion of literary form cannot be accomplished except by literary means, that is, through an effort essentially formal';<sup>2</sup> and from both these points of view Beckett's art is

<sup>1</sup> 'Denis Devlin', pp.289-290.

<sup>2</sup> 'Literary Form and Social Hallucination', Partisan Review XXVII,4 (Fall 1960), p.648.



absolutely modern: his novels incorporate a critique of their medium, and their self-consciousness leads to a constant pre-occupation with form. It is this incessant self-examination that shows up their age-old central theme, the vanity of human wishes, in a new light, and relates it to the twentieth century. The major impact of an art concerned principally with form is bound to be aesthetic -- which brings us back to our starting point of the need to approach the novels as "things in the world". What David Daiches would consider to be the "true meaning" of a novel, can also be seen as part of its aesthetic value: 'all the suggestions and cumulative insights which derive from adequate symbolization, adequate enrichment of meaning at all points through style, pattern, plot, rhythm, tone -- everything'.<sup>1</sup> The subtlety of Beckett's logic, the courage of his epistemological investigation, the compassion and sensitivity of his portrayal of human nature all contribute to the value of his work as products of the artistic experience. It is the complexity of the artist's vision which ultimately must compensate for its harsh restriction. Principally it is to the novel as translation of that vision that our attention must be given. Professor Daiches' conclusion accords with this view: 'Ideally, there is no such thing as the subject of a good novel. There is only the novel'.<sup>2</sup>

Beckett's is by no means a Joycean synthesis, since the

<sup>1</sup> A Study of Literature (1948: 3rd Edn. 1968), p.57.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

tension of contraries inherent in its accomplishment is never transcended; he thus avoids the sense of control over his world which Joyce, by contrast, aimed at. Beckett, as his discussion with Tom F. Driver shows, is deeply aware of the clash between art's need for a form -- implying organisation -- and the chaos inherent in life; hence his search for a 'new form ... that ... admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else', and his admission that 'the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates'.<sup>1</sup> Although in Proust he speaks of a fusion of form and content -- 'The one is a concretion of the other, the revelation of a world' (Pr,88) -- he later arrives at the understanding that all concretion entails falsification, and that to reveal the inner world is to destroy it. When we say that his novels translate his vision of man it would be more accurate to say they translate the creative act (again the necessity for self-consciousness), that is the act of exploration of man's nature. Vision here refers to a way of seeing and not to an organised perception. And Beckett's sensitive manipulation of language, to distort Leavis on Swift, indicates a mind in possession of the act of experiencing, but not of a coherent experience. Being, towards which his art reaches, escapes language. Thus to Lawrence Harvey Beckett 'admitted to using words where words are illegitimate. "At that level you break up words to

<sup>1</sup> 'Beckett by the Madeleine', p. 23.

diminish shame. Painting and music have so much better a chance."<sup>1</sup> He spoke of 'the need for a "syntax of weakness." He felt that "Being is constantly putting form in danger," and conversely that he knew of no form that didn't violate the nature of being "in the most unbearable manner."<sup>2</sup>

In order to find this form for Being, Beckett has peeled away surface after surface in the inner world, passing from the flux of becoming experienced by Watt and Molloy to the stillness of piled up time intimated in L'innommable and Comment c'est, from Watt's clumsy attempts to pierce the barrier of syntax to the disconnected language of Comment c'est and the Residua. He is frequently accused or praised for his destructiveness in art.<sup>3</sup> But, as Maurice Blanchot points out, many new writers have destroyed something in the novel -- Woolf, Joyce, Musil, Broch, Mann.<sup>4</sup> To speak of "anti-novels" or "anti-heroes", as so many commentators do, implies destruction only. Beckett's philosophy is nihilistic; the assertion of the Unnamable, 'je vais continuer' (I,262), on which William Barrett bases his view that Beckett's approach to life is not nihilistic but positive,<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Harvey, p.249.

<sup>2</sup> Harvey, p.435.

<sup>3</sup> George Steiner, Language and Silence: Essays 1958-66 (1967), pp.67-68, disapproves; Bernard Pingaud, 'Molloy douze ans après', Temps modernes XVIII,200 (jan.1963), pp.1283-1300, approves, for example.

<sup>4</sup> 'D'un art sans avenir', NNRF VIII,51 (mars 1957), pp.488-498 -- itself an essay on the destructiveness of modern art.

<sup>5</sup> 'The works of Beckett hold clues to an intriguing riddle', Saturday Rev., June 8 1957, p.16.



must be seen in the light of the speaker in Comment c'est who asserts 'je vais crever' (CC,177) -- neither is supported by a conviction of choice, so that Beckett's is simply a courageous resignation to the inevitable; his art, however, is not by any means nihilistic. Professor Fletcher holds that 'Beckett's deepest pessimism is not about life ... but about literature',<sup>1</sup> but this is surely only if we accept that it is the function of literature to express; if we allow that its function may be extended to include the suggestion of the ineffable, the 'evocation of the unsaid by the said',<sup>2</sup> then concern with the unsayable does not imply pessimism. If Beckett breaks up surfaces in his art, it is to probe beneath them towards a reality of the depths; if he dissolves the personality it is to reach the void of Being at the heart of self; under his scrutiny human temporal systems collapse, but the stillness of atemporality makes itself felt in the circular movement and through the weighty silences of his prose; he is not, as Alec Reid is not alone in claiming, 'intent on the destruction of language',<sup>3</sup> but abandons a syntax of causation and logic for what he terms a "syntax of weakness", better suited to formulate his vision of reality. It is through breaking up old forms that his novels make room for new.

The forms his novels have assumed have developed from evoking the chaos of the outer world to suggesting the proximity of

<sup>1</sup> Fletcher, Art, p.145.

<sup>2</sup> 'Denis Devlin', p.293.

<sup>3</sup> Reid, p.11.

the changeless inner void. Where the early short stories, and even Murphy, were given a distinct social setting, the outer world becomes less and less real as novel succeeds novel, until, in Comment c'est, "life in the light" appears only as fleeting images in the mind, as dream or fantasy. In Lessness the only reality is the inner void, and surface living is apprehended as ephemeral dream: 'little body face to endlessness. Never but in vanished dream the passing hour' (L,10). Belacqua and Murphy, and indeed, although with more ambiguity, Watt, were given objective existence through the eyes of their companions. But the outer reality of the protagonists gradually breaks up to become an irrelevancy in Comment c'est, where all that covers the inner void is the faltering, anonymous recording voice -- become an inner eye in Lessness where the containing body seems simply a division between outer and inner voids related through ocular cavities: 'Little body grey face features crack and little holes two pale blue. Blank planes sheer white eye calm long last all gone from mind' (L,8). Sequential story in Murphy becomes a stylised, repetitive movement in Comment c'est, an undisguised technique for rendering changelessness in narrative form. And, of course, the brevity of Lessness permits a diminished structure so that the static nature of ultimate reality is reflected in the peculiarly static prose. Even the slightly more substantial Le dépeupleur sets its single action on such a remote level of possibility as to deprive it of all solidity: 'ce petit peuple de chercheurs dont un premier si ce fut un homme dans un passé

impensable baissa enfin une première fois la tête si cette notion est maintenue'.<sup>1</sup> Particularly remarkable is the gradual Schopenhauerian submission of the will as the novels progress. The will to understand and the ensuing pain of bewilderment are slowly subdued, and we pass from Murphy's optimism through the Unnamable's active despair, to the humorous resignation of Comment c'est. The quiescence advocated by Schopenhauer seems really to be achieved in the *Residua*, so that, for all its bleakness, the tone of Lessness is serene.

It is clear that Beckett's art is not static, contrary to his vision of life. He has approached the reality of Being through his shifting art forms. And he is still seeking to draw nearer to it, still hopeful. To Lawrence Harvey he said: 'there is a form, but it doesn't move, stand upright, have hands. Yet it must have its form. Being has a form. Someone will find it someday. Perhaps I won't, but someone will. It is a form that has been abandoned, left behind, a proxy in its place'.<sup>2</sup> It is impossible, therefore, to agree that he is pessimistic about art. He has set about a radical change of its forms for a specific purpose, to allow it to relate to the void of Being. Where his earliest prose fiction was full of movement and brilliant verbal structures, in his most recent work, Lessness, the central calm and stillness permeates a barely structured language. Its

<sup>1</sup> Le dépeupleur, p.55 -- significantly, it is the added "coda" written in 1970 which undermines the whole structure, its opening lines being echoed in its close quoted above: 'Ainsi de suite à l'infini jusqu'à ce que vers l'impensable fin si cette notion est maintenue seul un dernier cherche encore ... ce dernier si c'est un homme ...' (p.53).

<sup>2</sup> Harvey, p.249.



form is more suited to the realm of the atemporal than the temporal.

In his art Beckett does set death aside, a goal which Professor Coe discerns in the Trilogy, and he does effect a kind of immortalisation in words, as Ludovic Janvier considers to be his final aim,<sup>1</sup> but it is with no sense of triumph that this is achieved since it entails a depersonalisation of self. Death annihilates all that individualises the self. The concept of eternity is peculiarly joyless and it is notable that the rich humour of the earlier novels is completely absent in Lessness. Once surface life is set beyond the range of the verbal world, the added richness of the emotional domain which gave Beckett's work its widest appeal is lost. The tension of opposites which permitted the erection of the architectural structures in the novels can no longer be effected when the world of surfaces and time recedes so far from the creative mind, and it is difficult to imagine how a prose work of the dimensions of a novel can again be produced if Beckett's art continues in the direction in which it is moving at present. Lessness seems to bow before the inevitable loss in death of all that is unique about the self. The atemporal inner void merges with the void of eternity. The calm eye contemplates the changelessness of ultimate Being, and the realm of surfaces,

<sup>1</sup> Coe, p.65; Janvier, p.260.

where a little step takes man from birth to death, is dismissed.

True refuge long last issueless scattered down four walls  
over backwards no sound. All sides endlessness earth sky  
as one no stir not a breath. Blank planes sheer white calm  
eye light of reason all gone from mind. Scattered ruins ash  
grey all sides true refuge long last issueless (L,11).

The void of Being is surely close at hand here, as is the void  
of death -- the impersonal void of eternity. This disillusioned  
Narcissus has arrived, through his art, at his own particular  
"Intimations of Immortality".

## S E L E C T E D   B I B L I O G R A P H Y

The Bibliography of Samuel Beckett's works includes only those works used in preparation of the present thesis. For greater clarity, the prose fiction is listed in the order of writing, not publication, since these differ in several cases. Where the edition of Beckett's work cited in the text is not the first edition, that used is also included in the Bibliography.

In the Critical Bibliography, articles included in collected essays, or later incorporated in books by the same author, are also listed separately in the section for articles.

Except where otherwise stated, the place of publication for books is London. Abbreviations for periodicals are as recommended by the MLA Style Sheet.

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WORKS BY SAMUEL BECKETTCriticism and Reviews

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- Review of Rainer Maria Rilke, Poems, trans. J.B. Leishmann, 1934, The Criterion XIII, 53 July 1934, 705-7.
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- 'Ex Cathezra', The Bookman, LXXXVII (Christmas 1934), 10 (a review of Ezra Pound, Make It New, 1934); also 'Papini's Dante' (a review of Giovanni Papini, Dante Vivo, 1934), p. 14.
- 'An Imaginative Work!', Dublin Mag., XI, 3 (July-Sept. 1936), 80-81 (a review of Jack B. Yeats, The Amaranters, 1936).
- 'Denis Devlin', Transition, No. 27 (April-May 1938), 289-294 (a review of Intercessions, 1937).
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- 1932 'Text', The New Review II,5 (April 1932), 57 -- from 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women'.
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Date of  
Composition

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